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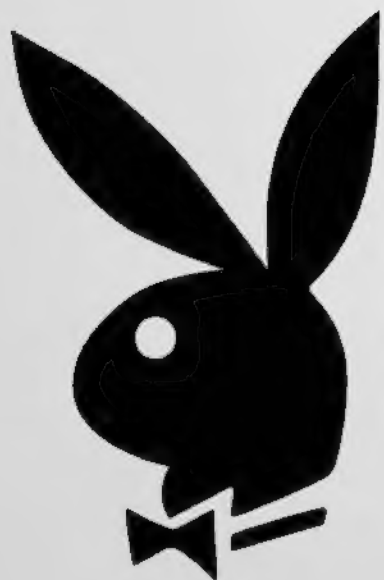
BEAUTY THAT STOPS TIME

Stacey Cruz

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CONTENTS

06	THE TRUE THREAT 8chan's founder, its current owners and a range of experts debate online hate speech
20	ANTIFA IN FOCUS Out of the shadows and on the record: a bracing look at the antifascist movement
28	AVERAGE ACCEPTANCE NOW Quinta Brunson takes a stand between badass and basic
34	THE DIRTY MIND GUIDE 2 - TALKING DIRTY It's Smut 101 in this lesson on hot talk: "Erotic language is like a vibrator for your imagination!"
52	WORLD OF PLAYBOY We give you another glimpse into the spectacular happenings of everything bunny!
56	THE ART OF ATTENTION Artist Hank Willis Thomas is a master of the pop-culture collision
74	YOUR FIRST PET AND THE STREET YOU GREW UP ON As a pet, Magenta is forgettable; as a friend, she's... something else. New fiction from Kiley Reid
78	GAZILLIONAIRE: 7120 Can Micah Veerman seed the universe with his 22nd century... ideas? A tale of adventure capitalism from Matt Lubchansky
92	A VERY MILLENNIAL SCANDAL Katie Hill's resignation is only the beginning of what she expects to become a generation-defining fight for privacy

12	PICTORIAL AMY SHARP
42	ON THE COVER STACEY CRUZ
66	PICTORIAL JOLENE HEXX
84	PICTORIAL MIMI
ISSUE No 87 March 2025	



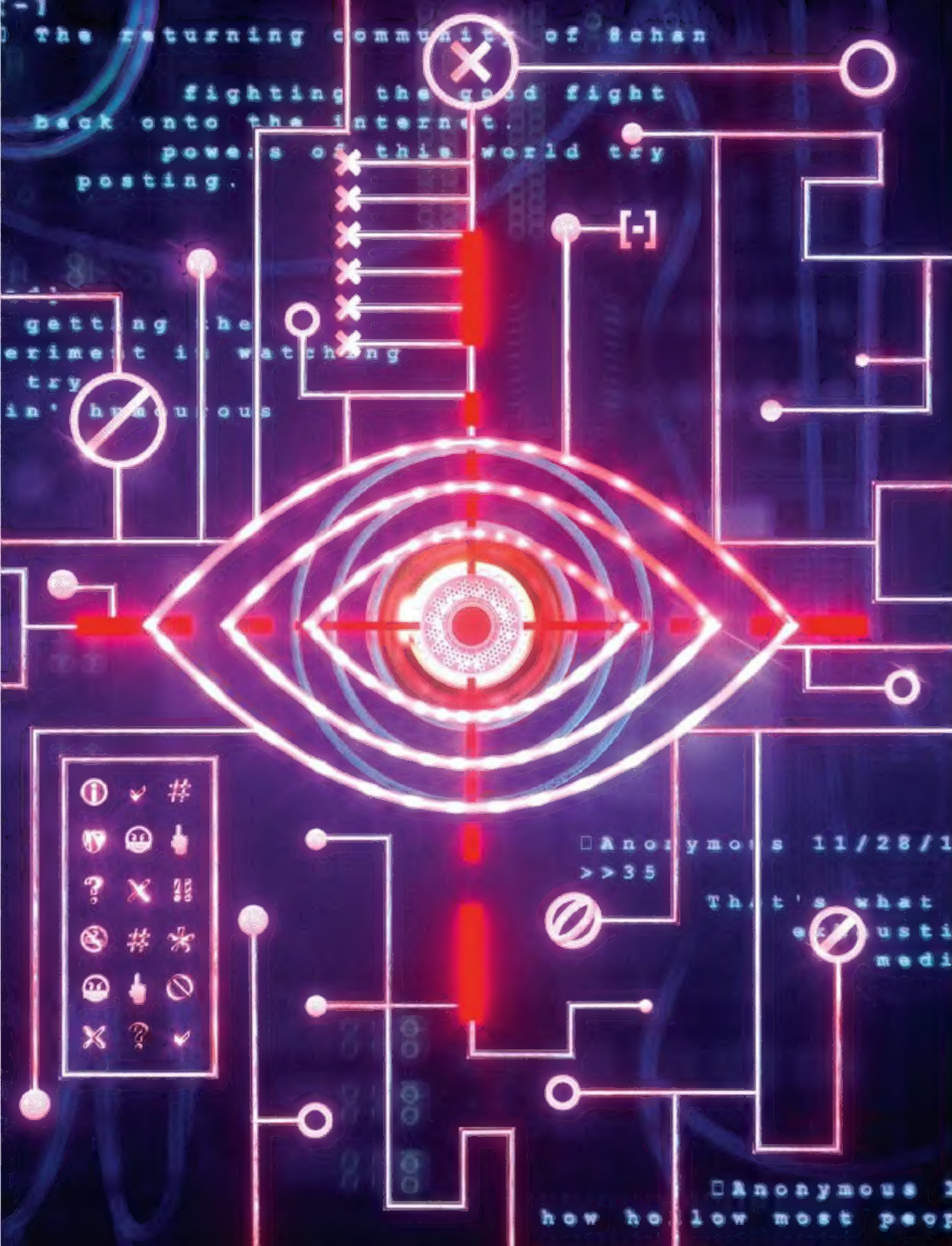


ILLUSTRATION BY BLAKE KATHRYN

The True Threat

8chan founder and former “king of the trolls” Fredrick Brennan is fighting a multifront war over how—and whether—to counter hate speech; here, a report from the front lines **BY DONOVAN FARLEY**

At the outset of an interview held on Christmas Eve of this past year, Fredrick Brennan expresses some relief that our Skype session is audio only: It allows him to relax a bit more.

Throughout this conversation and over two months of further Skype calls and Twitter DMs, the 8chan founder is erudite, outgoing and quick to laugh. This is hard to square with his former reputation as king of the trolls — a free-speech absolutist and overlord of the anonymous and unmoderated chat forum known these days as a global gathering place for white male extremists, an incubator of QAnon and a repository of manifestos written by mass shooters.

Now in his mid-20s and based in the Philippines, Brennan is weary of discussing the many ways his creation slipped out of his control, but he seems to feel duty-bound to do so. He left the site in 2018, having launched it five years earlier, and last year began to speak out on Twitter and in the press. He claims that 8chan, now rebranded as 8kun, is such a danger that it should be permanently deplatformed, an idea repellent both to 8chan devotees and to, well, every other source who went on record for this story, from a developer to a senator to the site's current owners.

Beyond his obvious intelligence, Brennan has an almost childlike quality that has a lot to do with his newfound enthusiasm for the real world, where events such as his recent marriage have helped draw him from the darkness. He displays little of the awkwardness that often defines your typical tech genius. But he wasn't always like this.

At the age of 14, already dealing with painful isolation as a result of a congenital condition (he was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, or brittle bone disease, which stunted his growth and keeps him in a wheelchair), Brennan, along with his similarly disabled brother, was placed in New York's foster care system. The internet became his sanctuary.

"When the internet first came into my house, it was very different to be able to communicate that way, but it also became a replacement for real life," he says. "And when you're a kid, you don't know it's less than."

Brennan insists he didn't intend to create a platform for mass murderers. Just as Facebook began as a site where Harvard students could rate one another's attractiveness and evolved into a cultural behemoth with the power to affect presidential elections, 8chan grew, albeit on a much smaller scale, into something its creator never imagined.

"Platforms over time develop a personality. 8chan on its first day was never going to get an El Paso shooter posting on it," he says, referring to the 2019 massacre in a Texas Walmart that left 22 innocent people dead. Adding that incident to the shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, and Poway, California, 74 people were killed last year by men who'd posted their manifestos on 8chan.

"The platform and the community there developed to allow that kind of behavior," Brennan says, "and that's something that takes years to happen."

His use of the word personality raises questions: What other human traits might 8chan possess? Does its ability to change offer hope that its condition isn't terminal?

...

8chan is hardly the first image-and-discussion board of its type: It followed 4chan, which was launched in the mid-2000s by current Google employee Christopher Poole. (The idea for 4chan came, in turn, from Poole's experience on the Japanese site 2chan.) Poole's stated ethos for the platform was "a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images."

The freewheeling camaraderie offered on 4chan and its ilk

was welcome in the face of growing internet regulations. 4chan first sprang into the national consciousness when the hacking collective Anonymous began using the board to discuss plans for hacks and pranks. It also bred legendary memes such as Rickrolling, lolcats and Pepe the Frog — the heavy-lidded cartoon amphibian that mutated, without its creator's consent, into a hard-right mascot. Racists, homophobes, pedophiles and misogynists, drawn by the site's lax moderation, used their shared beliefs to harass and troll those who opposed them, both online and off.

When the Gamergate controversy — a loose campaign of doxxing and threats leveled at female video game developers and writers — erupted in 2014, Poole banned all discussion of the matter. This prompted outrage among the site's heaviest users, which in turn prompted a migration to 8chan, at that time a little-known offshoot. Soon the de facto home for white nationalists and neo-Nazis, Brennan's platform also became such a popular hub for child pornography that the site was briefly delisted from Google Search.

QAnon — a collection of baseless conspiracy theories revolving around Q, a supposed government insider who insists President Trump is fighting a secret battle against a cabal of Democratic elites who run a satanic child-sex ring — exists on the board because the poster's identity can be confirmed only via their 8chan ID. That is to say, no one knows Q's real-world identity for certain, but their 8chan handle at least suggests that one person is running the show. At press time there are dozens of Q-related Facebook groups all over the world, with the top few seeing nearly 2,000 posts a day. At least 19 current congressional candidates have voiced support for the conspiracy theory, which has allegedly resulted in several acts of violence and one murder.

Brennan hints at the inner shift that eventually compelled him to leave 8chan: "I was one of these libertarian idiots thinking, Oh, you know, my in-box is just ideologically diverse — even though it was mostly Nazis e-mailing me."

As the site's popularity intensified — according to Brennan, it mushroomed from around 100 posts a day to more than 4,000 an hour in 2014 — the founder became overwhelmed by the gargantuan task of keeping the board online: Bandwidth and contentflagging issues were constant. Suffering from severe burnout and strapped for funds, he agreed to a partnership with internet entrepreneur Jim Watkins in 2014, on the condition that Brennan would relocate from the U.S. to Watkins's base in the Philippines and be retained to help run the site.

Watkins, an Army veteran, pig farmer and self-described serial entrepreneur in his mid-50s, accumulated a great deal of his fortune via his first start-up, a porn website designed to circumvent 1990s Japanese censorship laws. The experience not only enriched Watkins (whose ubiquitous uniform of graphic T-shirt and shorts exudes something of a "Roger Stone on vacation" vibe), it instilled in him a disdain for censorship and a reputation for circumventing it.

Brennan sold the site to Jim Watkins in 2015, and Jim's son Ron emerged as the project's new champion. It was Ron who first told Jim about Brennan, and it's Ron who works on 8kun every day.

Initially the move was a blessing. The trio were kindred spirits who forged something of a bond under the site's motto: Embrace infamy. Brennan, however, began to tire of the daily moral degradation clogging his in-box. By December 2018 he'd had enough.

"The most important change in mind-set was that I came to believe Jim and Ron do not operate 8chan in good faith but rather to twisted ends," he says. "Their actions continue to betray them — for example, helping QAnon post and making sure QAnon's



identity would remain stable [during the transition from 8chan to 8kun], which they did for no one else." Ron Watkins, whose father is suing Brennan for libel over remarks he tweeted last year, addressed these claims via Twitter DM: "Fred is currently fighting a criminal libel case, so I can't recommend him as a good source of information." Pressed about possible connections to Q, Ron said, "Nobody from our team has had private contact with Q."

Last March, when a member of 8chan attacked two mosques in New Zealand, killing 51 and injuring 50 more, Brennan's relief at having left the site began to transmute into anger and shame. God help me if I started this, he thought. He vowed to make ending 8chan his new life aspiration. Little did he know the year's horrors had just begun.

...

Ron Watkins is unfailingly polite in all our Twitter DM chats but gets immediately down to business when I raise the subject of censorship. He skates around my questions concerning any guilt he may feel about what happens on the site. What is clear is that he adamantly believes in 8chan's mission of total autonomy for online speech.

"Corporations are taking control of most online spaces and removing speech while citing their increasingly restrictive terms and conditions of service," he says. "They frenziedly overreach with such impunity that the government does not even need to participate in censorship anymore."

Of course not everyone on 8chan/kun is a hateful degenerate, and Ron is quick to point out that those voices would bear the brunt of deplatforming as well. "Our entire platform with thousands of users is being actively silenced because companies that hold too much power over the infrastructure of the internet have decided that certain opinions shouldn't be allowed to be heard," he says. "We need to begin discussing an internet bill of rights that addresses content neutrality, data privacy and a host of other issues affecting the daily online lives of all Americans."

8chan vanished after multiple service providers cut ties in the wake of El Paso. At that time, Alexa's internet-traffic-ranking service listed 8chan in the top 5,000 sites worldwide — an impressive feat for a site that doesn't appear in Google searches. The gap between 8chan's disappearance and 8kun's birth three months later came at a heavy price for Jim and Ron Watkins: At press time Alexa ranked 8kun 45,094.

When Jim was called before Congress after the El Paso shooting (he wore a QAnon pin affixed to his collar), he made many of these points. Brennan tells me this appearance was a sham. The government, he says, lacks the internet literacy to comprehend what it's dealing with.

"What Congress gets wrong is they always call in the bad actor, the people who've done wrong," he says. "What they need to do is also bring in 4chan admins and ask, 'How do you guys do it? How did you clean up the site?'"

Judging by the views of a range of techies and legal experts, the site is not the unknown entity here.

...

The true-threat doctrine, established by the 1969 Supreme Court case *Watts v. United States*, attempts to lay the groundwork for courts to differentiate between potentially dangerous statements and those made in jest. But in a world where an innocuous cartoon frog and the "OK" hand signal can be appropriated by neofascists, how can one hope to identify and track potentially violent users?

"Defining hate speech is notoriously difficult, and therefore content monitoring at scale is extraordinarily challenging," says David Cole, national legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union, via e-mail. "The range of information, the volume of material and the nuances of context make the task virtually impossible."

There's no consensus on when internet speech enters the realm of the harmful and illegal, no line drawn in the sand à la falsely shouting "fire" in a crowded theater. Perhaps no line can be drawn on ground that shifts by the second.

Author, New York Times columnist and former Fusion TV news director Kevin Roose has written extensively about 8chan. “I’m not sure there should be a ‘line’ at all,” he says. “These are private businesses that all have to make, and live with, their own choices about where to draw the line. Some platforms have amplified the voices of reprehensible people and allowed dangerous movements to hijack their services, and their executives will have to live with the repercussions of those choices for the rest of their lives.”

But if the meteoric rise and apparent disregard for social responsibility shown by giants like Facebook have taught us anything, it’s that tech titans can’t be trusted to do what’s right when it harms their bottom line. Longtime Democratic senator Ron Wyden of Oregon, who introduced the first Senate net-neutrality bill in 2006, tells me the answer may lie in economics.

“There’s no doubt that mainstream platforms like Facebook have failed for far too long to step up and respond to the slime and hate that has no place on a site that also hosts family photo albums and local business pages,” he says. “The largest sites have grown complacent, thanks to their massive size and market dominance, so they have little fear that new competitors with more responsible policies will emerge as true rivals.”

Indeed, essentially every person who uses the internet must adhere to the content-moderation whims of a handful of unelected people whose employers profit directly from online hate and disinformation. Although he opposes government interference that limits online speech — “The last thing I want to do is put Donald Trump and William Barr in charge of a government speech police who decide what people can say online” — Senator Wyden thinks decreasing the power a few people in Silicon Valley wield over billions of others’ online experience could help.

“It’s appropriate for the Justice Department or the Federal Trade Commission to look at whether the largest tech companies are abusing their market position to prevent real competition, to the detriment of internet users across the country,” Wyden says. “I think real competition would go a long way toward relegating these hateful sentiments to the dark corners of the internet.”

Cole echoes this sentiment: “An antitrust approach may well make sense, to the extent that one of the problems is the control of vast platforms of public debate by a handful of companies.”

But how long would that take, and in the meantime how many sick men will post their manifestos to an unmoderated forum that helps galvanize their poisoned thoughts into action?

...

Ash Bhat’s RoBhat Labs develops apps — including BotCheck me, a Google Chrome extension that alerts Twitter users when they encounter fake accounts — to combat a number of online ills. He forcefully opines that the answer lies not in tech nor in government oversight.

“Being able to speak and be heard goes down to our evolution,” he says via e-mail. “We can’t deplatform online communities, especially when we disagree with them. The fact that people are killing people is the problem, not deplatforming. We’ve seen this already! We’ll shut down a site and it’ll inevitably pop right back up. As a society, the shootings are a sign that there’s something incredibly wrong. If anything, we should be listening to these voices. These may be our brothers and sisters — literally.”

Although Bhat and Brennan disagree on deplatforming, both refer to the sites’ users as victims. The men on these sites likely band together because they share feelings of being left behind, of being unloved. Via the sites, they discover human connection, reprehensible though its conduit may be, that their lives previously lacked. Ironically, they can be seen as victims

of the same dehumanizing technology through which they’ve found fellowship.

Decentralization, a strategy gaining momentum as the general public reaches a crisis with online-inspired murders, could be another way to break the cycle. Decentralization means users control their own data and resources and disseminate them from their own, much smaller networks. This runs counter to centralized computing, wherein the majority of functions are carried out from remote sources owned and operated by corporations. The allure of such a system is that smaller players could wrest back some of the power currently being hoarded by the likes of Facebook, Google, Amazon, YouTube and Twitter. This would make deplatforming nearly impossible, but the hope would be that once big tech’s immense power is diminished, increased competition would force sites to become more beholden to users who don’t want to share online space with neo-Nazis.

The Mark Zuckerbergs of the world are unlikely to give up their power without a protracted fight, yet Bhat sees this as a more realistic solution — or at least a breaking point.

“Taking the longer-term lens, the clock is ticking for us to figure this out. The internet seems to be transitioning toward decentralization — even Jack Dorsey and Twitter are taking steps toward this,” Bhat says. “Someday soon we won’t be able to deplatform these voices. It’s now or then that we start listening to them.”

But this approach cuts both ways: It promises immunity to users, no matter how hateful they may be, while compelling moderators to be smarter about keeping potentially dangerous language off their platforms. It’s impossible to predict which side would win out, or even when this day would come. Perhaps that’s why Brennan is pushing in the other direction.

...

Ron Watkins likens 8kun’s plight to that of public figures who’ve been felled by cancel culture.

“As we enter the start of a new decade, cancel culture has taken hold, and societal shunning is becoming more and more in vogue, with deplatforming representing the internet’s equivalent,” he says, noting that, thanks to Fredrick Brennan, “8kun weathered many deplatforming attempts even before a single new post was uploaded to the website.”

The amorphous nature of the internet — and the “societal shunning” Watkins observes in the real world — means that confronting online hate speech that begets real-world violence can be accomplished only via a diversity of tactics. Internet literacy for politicians and law enforcement, yes; confronting tech monopolies, yes. But even more so it seems we should reappraise the effects the internet can have on individuals and their perception of the real world.

Consider that for this piece I spoke with sources from all stations of life located all over the globe with an ease unimaginable at the dawn of this century. The fact that I was able to gather these voices without leaving my desk is awe-inspiring, just as it’s an undoubtedly beautiful thing that a lonely boy in a wheelchair can find community and happiness online.

But as this article was coming together, 8kun users were lamenting the arrest of three white supremacists linked to an extremist group that had threatened violence at the Second Amendment gathering in Virginia on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. They saw it as a missed opportunity for carnage and violence.

Fredrick Brennan tells me at one point that part of the problem with the internet is that it has “no tribal elders, no oral history of what it means or what you should do with it or who should be using it.” We are writing that history now. What kind of humanity we imbue this moment with is up to us. ■



“I’m sorry, but sometimes my process becomes unwieldy.”



A VISION OF BEAUTY

Amy Sharp

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Such an absolute honor to have you on Playboy! Tell us about your modeling journey so far I got back into modeling around 2018 when I lost a lot of weight and got back in shape. I started doing TFP shoots just for fun and to boost my confidence, but that quickly led to paid work. From there I was published in numerous magazines and publications, including Playboy and FHM. In 2022, I joined an agency based in LA, which has led to even bigger opportunities, including numerous billboards, and walking in New York Fashion Week and Paris Fashion Week this past September.

How would you describe your personal style? I dress super casually on a day-to-day basis, usually workout clothes 90% of the time as I work from home. I do love to dress up when I go out though, and I have a fetish for sexy stiletto shoes and a high-quality handbag! My favorite handbag is a Louis Vuitton purse I got during NYFW last year and my favorite shoes are a sexy pair of classic Louboutins.

Best place you have ever been to in the world? I love traveling internationally, learning about other cultures, and seeing how people live all around the world! My favorite places I've been to include Iceland, Finland, Peru, Cuba, Mexico, London, Paris, and Amsterdam! If I had to choose a top favorite, I would say Iceland because of its unique geography! You have glaciers, volcanoes, hot springs, and ice caves all in one place—it's the closest thing to being on another planet.

What was the biggest lesson from your worst breakup? My biggest lesson learned is to never compromise yourself, your values, your hobbies, or your passions for someone else. I once stopped dancing—my biggest passion—because it made my ex jealous, and that only led to resentment. That experience taught me the importance of staying true to yourself no matter what.

What are some of your biggest dreams you hope to achieve? I believe that the majority of humans are only tapping into a tiny fraction of their true potential, so my goal for 2025 is to see just how much more I can achieve. For me, that means continuing to level up in my HR career, modeling, and dance—defending my title as the US Pro-Am Mambo Champion, competing in 3-4 more na-

tional and international dance competitions, walking the runway at NY Fashion Week, and growing my HR Consulting Business. I'm also excited to take my daughter on an adventure through Italy and Spain. Beyond that, I have plenty of dance, fitness, and learning goals, but it's not about ticking boxes—it's about discovering what's truly possible for me.

What's one thing about yourself that your fans might be surprised to learn? I was born in Northern Indiana, but deep down, I'm basically a Latina at heart. I'm obsessed with Latin culture—the food, the music, the dancing—it's everything to me. My playlists are all Spanish music, mostly bachata, salsa, and reggaeton. In the next year or two, I'm planning to buy a rental property in Tulum, Mexico, so I can immerse myself in the culture even more.

What are some of your personal favorite recipes or meals that you enjoy cooking at home? I love teaching my daughter how to cook our weekly tradition is trying out at least one new recipe together. We're big foodies and enjoy all kinds of cuisines, but our favorites are Mexican, Italian, Thai, Indian, and, of course, sushi.

Who has been the biggest influence or role model in your life, and why? Two of my biggest influences are my dance partner Kevin Ullus and my coach, Milagros Lareto. They're both National Rhythm finalists and 6x US Mambo Champions. What's truly incredible is their story—they moved to the US from Peru with nothing, earned a new language, became world-champion dancers, and are now opening their own dance studio. When I think about everything they've accomplished and the obstacles they've had to overcome, I'm beyond inspired. It's an honor to work so closely with them. They push me daily and have been challenging me to grow as a dancer for the past seven years. They saw potential in me as a dancer long before I ever did, and for that, I'll always be forever grateful.

What is the absolute worst thing a man can do to completely put you off? The biggest turn-off for me is a man with no goals or ambitions. His goals can be completely different from mine, but it's so attractive when a man has goals in all areas of life: career, fitness/health, hobbies, etc.

Would you rather be loved, respected, or admired? Loved, because a loving relationship would encompass all three.

What are your future goals and aspirations for the future? In 2025, I'm super excited to be walking again in NY Fashion Week and Miami Swim Week! I'm also super excited to be competing in numerous dance competitions around the US, and possibly Puerto Rico. I have a big fashion campaign with a brand I can't disclose just yet, as well as a few other publications in the works! I'm also working on expanding my HR Consulting Agency and hopefully bring on my first employees this year.

Where can our readers keep up with your latest news and events? I'm most active on Instagram; feel free to follow my personal account at @amyrenee088 or my agency account @arareneexoxo. Thank you for all your love and support!

Thank you for your time, Do you have any final motivational words for our readers? Thank you for having me! My final words would be this: In a world that is becoming increasingly divided, especially in the online space, love and kindness are more powerful than ever. We might not always agree with one another, but it's essential that we approach each other with empathy and respect. Love has the ability to bridge gaps, heal wounds, and bring us together in ways nothing else can. Without it, we can't truly move forward or make a lasting difference. Always pause and choose love over judgment, kindness over anger, and connection over division—that's how we make any real change.

ANTIFA

A rare look inside
America's antifascist
movement—the
people, the methods
and the struggle to
find a clear voice in
a deafening world

BY DONOVAN FARLEY

Thankful one of their two babies is asleep, Stevens breast feeds the other during our interview. Neither parent comes across as a domestic terrorist.

But McKelvey and Stevens are involved with antifa—a decentralized network of leftists representing various belief systems and tactics, united only in their opposition to nationalists and white supremacists—and as such they inhabit the same category as the Unabomber and Timothy McVeigh. Or they would, if senators Ted Cruz and Bill Cassidy had succeeded last summer in designating the movement a domestic terrorist group. (Regarding the senators' efforts, President Trump tweeted, "Major consideration is being given to naming ANTIFA an 'ORGANIZATION OF TERROR.'")

McKelvey tells me that despite frequent threats to his family, showing up for antifa actions is something he and Stevens feel they must do. "I think it helps people to see a successful family defending antifascists, because those people often can't defend themselves."

Stevens adds, "When it was just Greg and me, it was easier to say, 'Threaten us all you want. I'm not scared of you.' But now, with two babies, it's not okay at all. I haven't hurt anybody, and I have no intention of hurting anyone, so why would you threaten my family?" It's solely because of our political beliefs.

When I call Gregory McKelvey and Kathryn Stevens, they're in the midst of an alternately quiet and cacophonous Saturday afternoon typical to young parents. The Portland, Oregon-based pair, interracial and in their late 20s, plan to be married next year.

Perhaps the problem lies in pinpointing what those beliefs are, how the movement acts on them and whom the movement consists of in the first place.

That confusion has often led to fear and anger, exacerbated by antifascists' use of anonymity as a defense against arrest and doxxing—though doxxing is also one of antifa's tactics. Notwithstanding recent efforts to raise this shroud of secrecy, including non-anonymous interviews with outlets such as *Rolling Stone* (and this one), anonymity has allowed a group of loosely connected activists to be demonized by members of the far right and, increasingly, centrists and moderate Democrats. As we stagger toward the 2020 election, antifa finds itself at a crossroads. Can it succeed, or even survive, without taking up the very tools its opponents have wielded to such ruthless effect?

...

I've studied Portland's antifa community since it came to prominence in the wake of the 2016 election, and I've reported on several protests and actions in that time. I can't claim total impartiality, in large part because many of my friends and neighbors are involved in the movement, but I can say I've observed antifa's victories and dysfunctions at close range. It's the movement's unique position in American culture—how it works, how it's perceived and the gaping blind spot between the two—that I've set out to explore.

For this story I interviewed a dozen or so antifa activists, who gave me new insights into the range of their methods, from electoral campaigns to, yes,

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTIE HEIM ELOK

IN FOCUS



street confrontations. Although monitoring far right groups online is a crucial part of the movement's work, I'm more interested in its public-facing efforts — the attempts to puncture the antifa stereotype, reveal the sprawling community beneath and loudly voice the message uniting them all. Hate requires active and direct confrontation.

But learning more about antifa requires a treacherous journey through its internal and external challenges. And you can't get a more potent demonstration of those challenges than a string of events, briefly violent and wholly absurd, that unfolded last summer.

On May 1, 2019, writer, Twitter personality and occasional Fox News commentator Andy Ngo was videotaped by an undercover antifascist who had embedded with the far right organization Patriot Prayer. (A Portland grand jury later used the video to indict several Patriot Prayer members.) In it, Ngo appears to smile while others make plans to attack a Portland cidery known to be an antifa hangout. According to reports, the ensuing incident left a woman with a broken vertebra after a man hit her with a baton. Ngo would then dox the injured woman as she lay in the hospital, she reportedly awoke to a cavalcade of death threats.

For this, plus previous instances of what some consider Islamophobia and misinformation on his social accounts, Ngo became fair game in the minds of some antifascists. (In an op ed, he pushed back against the allegations of Islamophobia.) On June 29, at a Portland rally organized by Patriot Prayer, he was punched and kicked by antifascists in black clothes and masks, who then stole the stunned writer's GoPro. Overnight, Ngo morphed from a fringe figure to a national sympathy case who received nearly \$195,000 from a GoFundMe organized by conservative commentator Michelle Malkin.

If only that were the end of the story.

The rally landed at the end of Pride Month, and the antifa group PopMob (short for Popular Mobilization) had organized a massive dance party for queer people and their allies to oppose the Proud Boys and other organizations that had joined in with Patriot Prayer. In a move reminiscent of recent antifascist actions in the U.K., PopMob decided to bring vegan coconut milkshakes. Antifa activists hit Ngo with multiple shakes, and Portland police, acting on a tip, tweeted, "Police have received information that some of the milkshakes thrown today during the demonstration contained quick drying cement." This tweet, which at press time is still on the department's official Twitter page and has more than 13,000 retweets and 25,000 likes, has yet to be substantiated by a single piece of evidence.

"We definitely weren't advocating throwing them at people," says Effie Baum, a fourth year graduate student and member of PopMob, "but we weren't naive enough to think it might not happen." Baum, who uses they/them pronouns, laughs tiredly at the suggestion that the shakes contained any sort of hardening agent. They point out, as many have, that PopMob would have been risking the murder of hundreds of people had they laced the drinks. This did not stop Fox News from reporting that "the so-called 'milkshakes' reportedly contained quick drying cement, pepper spray and raw eggs." The attention resulted in Baum receiving hundreds of violent threats from around the country.

It's no surprise that the Ngo incident played well with the Fox audience, but CNN's Jake Tapper took it upon himself to retweet a video of Ngo post-punch with the caption "Antifa regularly attacks journalists; it's reprehensible." (The "attacks" he posted included an egg being tossed, a camera cord being cut and University of Virginia students yelling at a journalist.) Tapper's colleague John Berman invited Ngo on his show. Neither anchor brought up Ngo's history of posting false or misleading statements on his Twitter account.

So—an attempt at peaceful protest was compromised by a moment of violence at

the hands of ostensible allies; that violence was pounced on by the opposition and swiftly turned into a narrative that was amplified by law enforcement and major media outlets.

The antifascists involved didn't have the media apparatus in place to combat the disinformation (though Baum tried), and a major opportunity to correct the record — to proclaim that antifa is not a pack of extremist hooligans — was lost in a fog of tweets and sound bites.

...

The antifascist activists I interviewed for this piece are eager to change the perception of the movement and spoke with me knowing they would receive torrents of threats for doing so. The vast majority of antifascist work consists, they tell me, not of black masks, street clashes and weaponized milkshakes but of behind-the-scenes organizing and countless hours spent observing far right communication channels.

People who do antifascist work are not, by and large, participants in the so-called black bloc, whose masks and sometimes aggressive presence at rallies are a magnet for media attention. Antifascists are doctors, parents and baristas. They're your neighbors. There are so many grandmothers involved in antifascist actions in Portland alone that they have their own organization, complete with monthly meetings and a Facebook page. At the Occupy ICE PDX protests last June, directly in front of federal agents dressed in riot gear and holding rifles sat a row of grandmothers. One of them was knitting. So why has antifascism become demonized by the right and shunned by the left? Much of the answer lies in the movement's anonymity and disdain for figureheads. Groups like Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys, along with their admirers in the media and Washington, D.C., have cultivated a stable of big personalities and a knack for messaging that has served them well under President Trump, allowing them to shape their own narrative and that of antifascism. In the social media age, when information (and misinformation) travels the world in the blink of an eye, the messaging effort is often as important as the message itself. It's not enough to be on the right side of history; you have to be on the right side of those reading and writing

Going out in the streets is only about 10 percent of what we do."

that history. While the far right has flourished, antifascists have painted themselves into a lonely corner by shunning the press and the centrist public.

Lucky for them, the press isn't the only tool at their disposal.

"I feel a responsibility to change the public discourse around antifascism, absolutely," says Sarah Iannarone, a 2020 candidate for mayor of Portland. (Her campaign is helmed by McKelvey.) Iannarone is a mother who has spent her professional life trying to make urban spaces greener and more livable, often traveling the world to discuss policy. She's aware that her open support of antifascism will mark her for threats and violence — and possibly cost her political capital — but she feels duty bound to the cause.

"Our society's lack of awareness and understanding of the issue is extremely disappointing to me," she says. "Because this problem exists within the system, it's important we use radical tactics — though I definitely think electoral politics matter, and that's why I'm running."

Iannarone's belief that antifascism should engage with mainstream politics is shared by many of the activists I interviewed; it's one of the reasons they spoke openly with me. These attitudes represent a shift in tactics within a movement that has traditionally been suspicious of the electoral process. Along with a nascent openness to the press, this approach could go a long way toward correcting the rampant misinformation against them.

PopMob's Baum represents a more counterintuitive strain of the "radical tactics" Iannarone mentioned. Over the past year, PopMob and its allies have sought to combat both the far right's endeavors and antifa's messaging problems through resistance theatrics, using marching bands to drown out loudspeakers and recently launching the "Banana Bloc," wherein roughly 40 activists dressed in banana suits and armed with brass instruments led a parade of about 100 people to protest a Proud Boys rally.

Baum points to community building and organizing as PopMob's central aim. In March 2019, after a series of attacks befell Portland's LGBTQ community, PopMob rapidly put together an event attended by about 600 people, featuring self-defense and community-awareness lessons. The organizers handed out more than 1,000 whistles, flashlights and self-defense key chains.

"I volunteered because I wanted to change attitudes," Baum says. "Going out in the streets is only about 10 percent of what we do."

The people who
are open about
their involvement
need to **change
their rhetoric,**
because right
now we are
bringing a **knife
to a gunfight."**



Opening page: Margaret
"Peggy" Zebroski
Previous spread: Gregory
McKevey and Kathryn
Stevens This page,
clockwise from left:
Jacob Bureros, Effie Baum
and Olivia Katb Smith

This page: An activist using black-bloc tactics charges through a 2019 May Day rally in Paris. **Opposite page:** Portland rally in August 2019 demonstrates tactics taken on anti-fascist activists.



Jacob Bureros, an activist whose participation in rallies and press ops subjects him to constant death threats, points to rarely covered community-minded work — such as the aid provided to Portland's most vulnerable residents during a brutal ice storm in January 2017. Activists delivered blankets and hot meals to the city's homeless and offered transportation to shelters. After a rash of violent attacks against the homeless in 2018, antifascists set up patrols of the various homeless camps around town.

And then there's Margaret "Peggy" Zebroski, a 69-year-old retired physician's assistant and grandmother. In February 2017, Zebroski participated in a protest against the killing of Quamee Hayes, a 17-year-old African American who was fatally shot by a white Portland cop with an AR-15 after Hayes had allegedly used a toy airsoft gun in a robbery. At the protest, a Portland police officer — in full riot gear, despite there being only about 50 protesters — pinned Zebroski's head to the pavement with his knee, breaking her nose.

"Well, I have to tell you that for me, in the context of things, this was a pretty trivial event," Zebroski tells me. "I've been doing demonstrations since I was a teenager. I've been clubbed in the head in San Francisco during Vietnam protests. It's the police harming the elderly, and that's upsetting — I get that. But we were protesting Quamee Hayes being killed. He died; I only had my nose broken."

...

Even in the face of such ardent civil disobedience, the question of physical confrontation remains. If antifascism really favors vigilance and community building over fists, why do some of its adherents give the far right what it wants by meeting its violence with more violence? Because for better or worse, sometimes it works out in the left's favor.

David (not his real name) is a family man in his mid-30s and a member of Rose City Antifa, one of America's oldest antifascist groups. He cites Richard Spencer, the white nationalist

whose fame peaked after he was punched in the face with cameras running. Spencer's assertion that the black bloc has made his allies afraid to show up to events suggests that violently confronting the far right can be an effective tactic. "If they can't find a protester in black bloc to fight," David explains, "they're going to go beat up an African American teen at a mall who is not involved in a protest whatsoever. They're going to attack somebody just walking down the street."

But the threat of violence goes beyond civilians on the far edges of the political spectrum. And for Bureros, a man of Filipino descent and a young father of two, the real danger doesn't come from the bigots in the streets.

"For all the threats I get, I'm still more afraid of the police state and what it can do," he says. "When you have police who can do whatever they want to you with impunity, that's a lot scarier."

An editorial in a 2017 issue of *Pax Centurion*, the official publication of the

Boston Police Patrolmen's Association, informed readers that, when dealing with antifascists, "the only way to defeat these savages is to fight fire with fire." The piece went on to equate antifascism with Nazism.

"The problem, of course, is with that blanket statement," says Norm Stamper, Seattle's police chief during the 1999 World Trade Organization protests, which helped give rise to Occupy Wall Street and much of the modern protest movement. (Stamper has repeatedly voiced his regrets at the heavy handedness with which his department responded to the massive protest.) "It's just plain wrong, and it's dangerous and ridiculous to think that way."

"Law enforcement has a responsibility to protect everyone at a protest — or a counterprotest — no matter what they're saying or what they believe," he adds. "It's extremely difficult at times, but that's the job we signed up for."

Of the domestic terrorist designation and its ties to policing, he says, "There is a fascist thread working its way through the body politic, and its head cheerleader is Donald Trump. His diehard followers would absolutely use such a designation to force law enforcement to help further their political cause, which is antithetical to what law enforcement is ostensibly all about."

Of course, quasi-fascism and *Pax Centurion* don't begin to speak for all law enforcement, and the rare instances of antifa affiliates hurling various projectiles their way are further steps away from antifa's core message. (The antifa slogan "All cops are bastards" or ACAB—while not equivalent to *Pax Centurion*'s claims, isn't helping either.) Activists say their anger arises with good reason and that they're often left to fend for themselves when attacked. In Portland, instances of overzealous policing include shooting nonlethal rounds into crowds of peaceful protesters, resulting in devastating head injuries; charging groups of black bloc antifascists, regular citizens and journalists alike (myself included); striking civilians with batons while driving them toward downtown traffic; and disproportionately arresting leftist protesters.

Which brings us back to black bloc—a small and often messy faction but an integral one. In January 2019, Patriot Prayer attempted to storm a Democratic Socialists of America meeting at Portland's Industrial Workers of the World union office. Portland DSA co-chair Olivia Katbi Smith wasn't there

that night, but she's been present for many similar Patriot Prayer-led incursions.

"It's incredibly frustrating when they do things like try to invade our meetings," Katbi Smith says. Reflecting on black bloc's greater significance, she adds, "People still wonder why we need the black bloc out there. That's exactly why. They put their bodies on the line for us."

...

When I ask McKelvey about the future of the movement, he replies without hesitation.

"Antifascism sure as hell has a PR problem," he says.

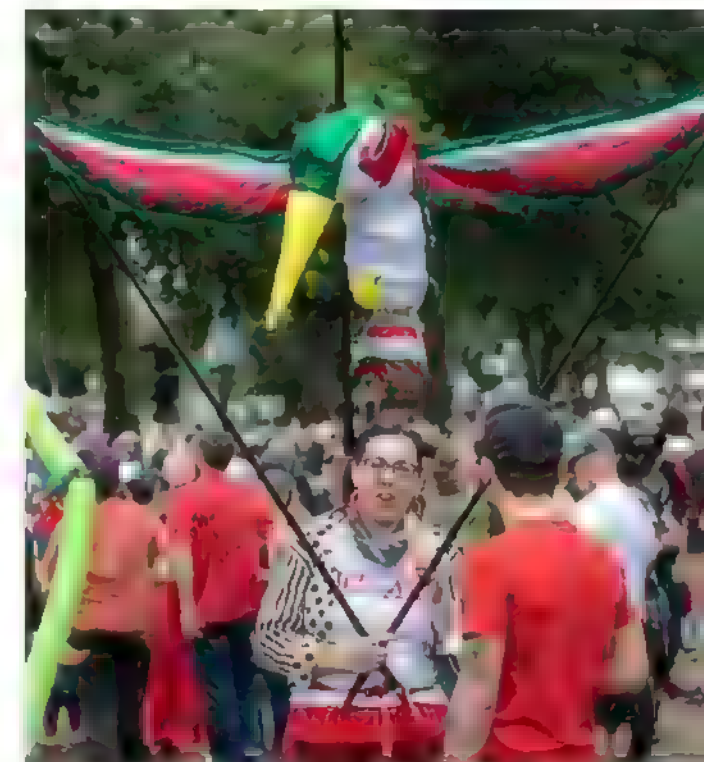
He goes on, and his words suggest an outline of how the movement might finally find a voice to meet that of the roaring far right: "These elements that Trump has inspired to come out of the woodwork aren't going anywhere regardless of what happens next year, so antifascists aren't either. We need to make it okay for people to say they support antifascism, including people in all levels of government. We're going to need people in the streets forever, but the people who are open about their involvement need to change their rhetoric, because right now we're bringing a knife to a gunfight."

Even if antifa coheres into a force strong enough to shift American culture away from the fears and hatred that continue to work their way into the mainstream, I can't help but think about the effect all that visibility could have on McKelvey and Stevens's family.

"Even with the kids?" I ask.

"Our kids," says Stevens, "are one of the reasons we're out there."

■





average acceptance now

Notes of a web-slaying comedian and *Black Lady Sketch Show* cast member who's fed up with the insane demands of capitalism, showbiz and social media

BY QUINTA BRUNSON

In 2016 I went to the Shorty Awards, a show that honors greatness in internet culture, at which you can be nominated for top comedy performance of the year along with a dog that went viral for having a tongue that hangs out all the time. It's humbling.

Anyhoo, I took a picture on the green carpet of an awards show I didn't necessarily want to be at. In all honesty, I was embarrassed. I dreamt of the Emmys, the Golden Globes — even the ESPYs, where I would present an award and offer comic relief next to LeBron James. An internet awards show felt beneath me.

I posted the green-carpet selfie on Instagram. For the most part the comments were kind and complimentary, filled with “yes girl!” and “slay gorgeous.” But there was one that has stuck with me for four years. “Eh, she's so average looking.”

Average. I don't know if the person who wrote that comment meant to insult me but... I take it back; I'm pretty sure that was 100 percent their intention. My first thought was no thought. The comment just kind of had me staring at it and trying to understand how I felt, whether to care and if I should say something back. I didn't, but I did care. At that point in my career I wanted to be outstandingly good at my job and to be considered pretty at least. I thought what probably everyone has thought, including the person who left the comment: In order to be worth something in this world, you have to be above average.

One definition of average is “the usual or ordinary standard, level or quantity.” If anything, average sounds, dare I say, *comfortable*? Constantly fighting to be more than average or even less than average seems exhausting, like entering yourself in a race you can't win while committing to being sweaty and out of breath for the rest of your life. When I had this epiphany, years later, I knew I needed to reevaluate my place in the endless race — and to ask myself why I wanted to run it in the first place.

I needed to take a stand: Average Acceptance Now.

Like most of us, I was taught to aim for the stars. In school we were told, “Look at George Washington Carver. He fucking invented peanut butter. You should strive to be just as amazing.” And look, I get it. I really do. But I wish I'd also learned something like “Look at Ms. Johnson, your computer teacher. She loves her job and has a nice house and a cool family.”

For me, a little girl who grew up on the west side of Philly, right at the intersection of the rich kids from UPenn and my friends who robbed the rich kids from UPenn, more realistic portrayals of a good life might have helped. While I think George Washington Carver was absolutely a fucking G, I wish I could have been impressed by my own father, a man who went to work and took care of his family every day. (Also, I wish

I had noticed the boys at school instead of worshiping Omarion from B2K and actually thinking I had a shot with him.)

Dear capitalism: Your insistence on obscene wealth is partly to blame. Berme and Warren talk about the vanishing middle class, which is great, but what about America's *average* class? After all, their electorate includes countless Americans who are not extraordinary or basic. The *We're the Millers* of the world. Pleasantly average.

Mainstream media, you're guilty too: You've promoted unhealthy and unattainable standards of beauty that have disturbed the psyches of all genders in America. You tell us that anything less than physical perfection is shameful — unless we have some weird quirk that can be marketed as “strong” or “brave” instead. But I'm not going to give you another lashing for your part in the war on the average. You get it every day, and you don't care. No, instead I'm going to focus on an issue closer to my heart.

The regular black girl can barely exist and be praised for it the way “everyday beautiful” starlets like Saoirse Ronan, Emma Stone and Brie Larson are. Don't get me wrong, I think these women are beautiful, but I don't see the same attention lavished on your everyday beautiful black girl actress or singer. If you happen to look like the average black girl, you're subject to scrutiny over whether or not you're attractive, the ways in which you look like an animal or a man and why women like you should be liked based on your talent, not your looks. Social media and the inflated currency of likes and shares are also to blame. We're all caught in the dirty cycle.

So I'm going to help break that cycle. I started here. Over the New Year's weekend, I went to Big Bear, California with some friends. I was so excited about heading to a cabin with people who have known me for years and always loved me for who I am. But on the way there, zigzagging through majestic mountains, I received a text. I was invited to a New Year's party thrown by a celebrity back in Los Angeles. Part of me wanted to somehow race back to the city and show

In school we were told, "Look at George Washington Carver. He **fucking invented peanut butter.**"



face at this party - to take bomb pictures and really flex on the 'gram. To be among the above average and prove I was one of them.

Not this time. Why would I want to go to a party where I would be forced to evaluate my status every other second, hovering over the snacks table and agonizing, *Am I famous too? Just a little bit? Like goofyfriend-in-1980s-sitcom famous at least?*

So I responded, "Thank you so much for the invite. I got my own things going on. All the best in the new year."

I chose my life.

I shut my phone off, looked around the car and almost shed one single G tear from the overabundance of peace I felt. I had left the race and decided to sit at the finish line. Because it turns out the finish line isn't at the end of the race at all; it's wherever people love your average-ass self.

Oh, and the anonymous user who left that mean comment on my Shorty Awards pic? Reader, I went to that person's page. They looked exactly like me. I hope I've embodied their every word.





OF SEX: THE DIRTY MIND

GUIDE 2 TALKING DIRTY











BEAUTY THAT STOPS TIME

Stacey Cruz

Model @staceycruz_1

Photography by Corrina Louise | @corrinalouisephoto







Such an absolute honor to have you on Playboy! Tell us about your daily schedule as a model, do you have a routine? Thank you! It's such an honor to be featured in Playboy. My daily routine is all about maintaining balance, beauty, wellness, and ambition. Mornings start with a workout, usually Pilates to stay in shape. I follow that with a healthy breakfast, skincare, and some time for personal growth, whether it's reading, learning a new skill, or working on creative projects. Afternoons are often filled with photoshoots, fittings, or brand collaborations, but I always make time to connect with inspiring people and expand my network. Evenings are for relaxing dinners at my favorite spots, travel planning, or enjoying a quiet night in with a great book or movie.

How do you like to begin your day? Usually with a coffee or fresh lemon water while I set my intentions for the day. I prioritize movement, whether it's Pilates, or a beach walk, to keep my body energized and my mind clear. Skincare is a must; it's a ritual that helps me feel my best. I also love taking time to listen to something inspiring, whether it's a great book or a podcast. Starting my morning with self-care and mindfulness sets the tone for a productive, beautiful day filled with exciting opportunities.

What helps you decompress and relax? With such a busy schedule, I believe in the importance of balance and self-care. One of my favorite ways to decompress is by indulging in spa day massages, facials, and a little time in the sauna to help me reset completely. I also love unwinding with a glass of fine wine or champagne while enjoying a beautiful view, whether it's by the ocean or on a rooftop at sunset. Travel is another way I recharge; there's something so refreshing about escaping to a breathtaking destination and experiencing new cultures and the world.

Who has been the most influential person in your life and why? I've been fortunate to have incredible role models in my life, but the most influential person has been my dad. He taught me the importance of ambition and never settling for less than I deserve. Watching him navigate life with confidence and purpose inspired me to always strive for the best, whether in my career, my personal growth, or the company I keep.



How romantic are you? Very! My love languages are quality time, touch, and gifts. I appreciate a man who knows how to be a man, someone who values romance as much as I do and isn't afraid to express it. Whether it's an elegant date night, a trip away, or simply the way he looks at me, true romance is in the details.

What is the most memorable date you've ever had? He booked a weekend away at a cabin in the woods. It was winter so we had a fire and made s'mores. Did some shopping, was super sport. The next day hiking. Was an amazing weekend, so thoughtful.

What was the biggest lesson from your worst breakup? Every experience teaches us something valuable. My worst breakup taught me the importance of knowing my worth and never settling for less than I deserve. I realized that the right relationship should feel effortless. Love should elevate both people, not drain them. Now, I value emotional intelligence, ambition, and a man who lets their partner be in their feminine.

Would you rather be loved, respected, or admired? While respect and admiration are important, I would always choose to be loved. True love encompasses both; it's the foundation



of any real relationship. When a man truly loves a woman, he naturally respects and admires her. Love is what makes a relationship extraordinary; it's what inspires grand gestures, deep loyalty, and a strong bond.

Are you a city traveler or a nature explorer? Both! The energy and sophistication of city life—dining at Michelin-starred restaurants, discovering hidden spots, and indulging in fashion, art, and culture. There's something about discovering a new city. At the same time, I find so much peace and inspiration in nature. There's nothing more refreshing than escaping to a private villa by the ocean, exploring a secluded tropical island, or waking up to the sounds of nature in a luxurious retreat.

What's on your travel bucket list? At the top of my bucket list is a private overwater villa in the Maldives, where I can wake up to the ocean and enjoy sunset dinners on the beach. I'd also love to explore the Amalfi Coast, yachting along the Italian Riviera. A safari in Africa. And of course, there's something about Tokyo; its mix of tradition and innovation is fascinating.

Where can our readers catch up with you and stay updated with your work? Probably just through my Instagram page. Some exciting things planned for the year.

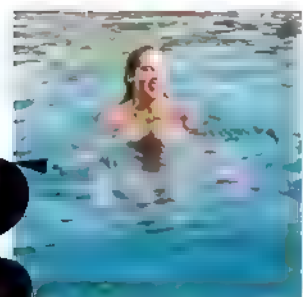


the dazzling

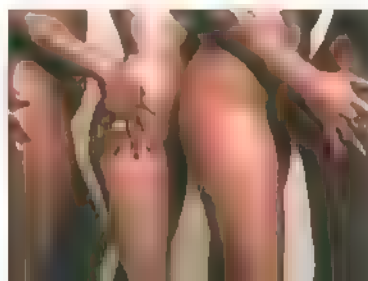
They say you shouldn't play favorites, so we didn't. This year a 12 of our 2019 Playmates of the Month will be honored as Playmates of the Year.

"Without evolution, nothing will ever succeed. It felt right to start the decade with a big change," says Krist Beck, Playboy's senior manager of partner strategy who helped make the decision to honor all the women instead of just one. "I'm indebted to a lot of our powerhouse, unique 2019 Playmates, and I'm excited to see a 12 represented as our Playmates of the Year in 2020."

Honoring collaboration over competition, all our Playmates from last year — along with 2019 PMOY Jordan Emanuel, who helped celebrate the changing of the guard — converged on a Los Angeles mansion in January for a shoot of historic proportions. The set buzzed with energy as photographers Al Milton and Chloe Chippendale, in collaboration with stylist Kelley Ash, captured the 12 PMOYs together (outtakes presented on this page). See the results of a veritable sisterhood of sizzles on page 100.



dozen



Boss Lady



When we heard Jameela Jamil (left), outspoken star of NBC's *The Good Place* and founder of the advocacy brand I Weigh, was interested in sitting for the Playboy Interview, we decided to take things a step further. Because Jameela's goal of a more inclusive world aligns with our own, we asked the entrepreneurial Brit to name some talent she felt deserved more attention. Topping the list was actress/comedian Quinta Brunson, author of this issue's defiant humor essay, *Average Acceptance Now*. No stranger to overachievement, Jamil was also pivotal in inviting April Playmate Marsha Elie into the Playboy family.

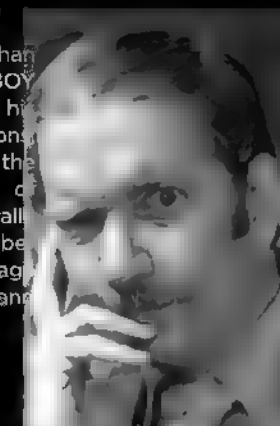
A Plus Plus

Holly Ruprecht, our associate director of subscriptions for Playboy Plus, had quite a January. First she presided over a panel on brand partnerships alongside Plus models Elsa Jean and Ana Foxxx at the XBIZ trade show in West Hollywood (right), where Playboy Plus won the XBIZ award for nude photography site of the year. The following week Ruprecht booked it to Vegas for the AVN adult expo, where she repped the brand and sold limited-edition T-shirts featuring Plus models — and where Playboy Plus collected a GFY nomination for best erotic/soft site.



Farewell, Old Friend

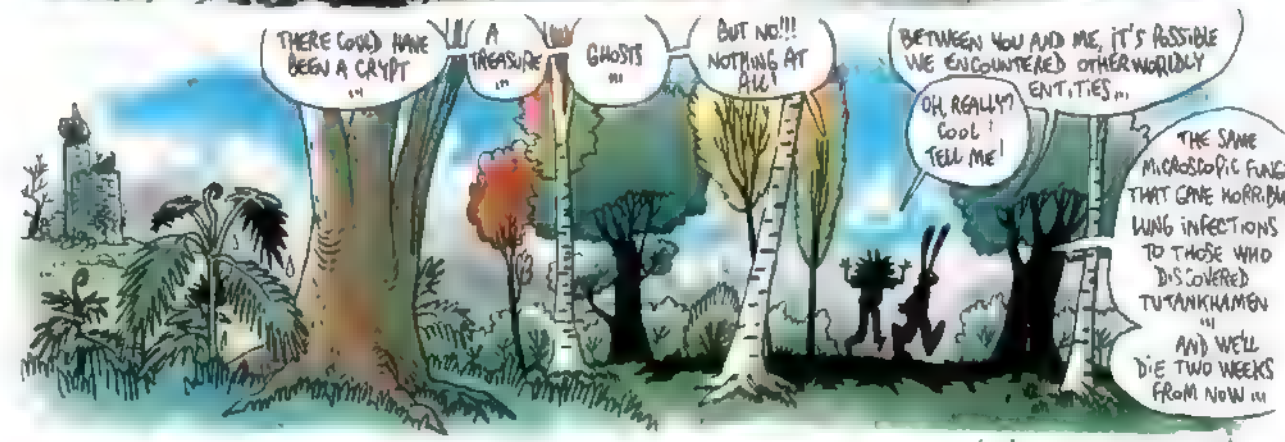
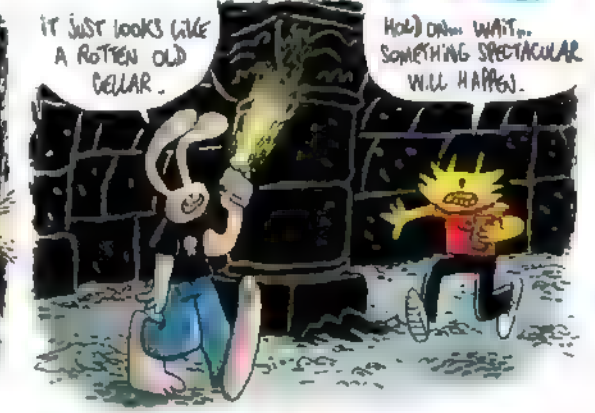
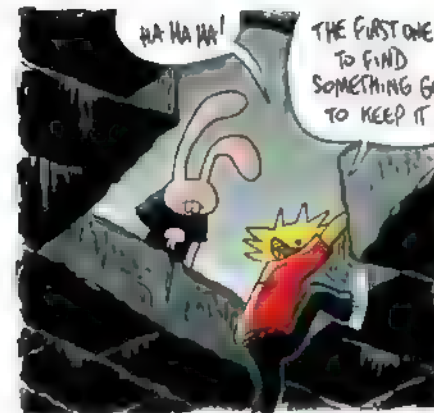
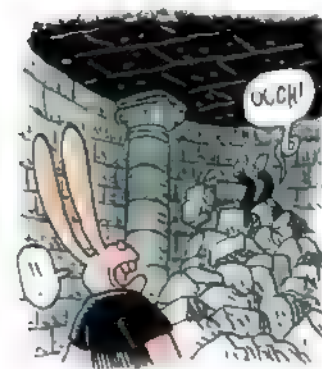
For more than 50 years Gahan Wilson (right) kept PLAYBOY readers entertained with his offbeat and irreverent cartoons, which typically plumbed the dark and dusty corners of human circumstance, generally to hilarious end. In November he passed away at the age of 89. Good-bye, Gahan, and thanks for all the laughs.



Getting Jazzy in June



The Playboy Jazz Festival kicks off June 6 at the Hollywood Bowl for its 42nd year. Longtime host George Lopez will emcee the slammin' two-day slate of performances from musicians including the Isley Brothers (right), Musiq Soulchild (left), Femi Kuti and the Positive Force, Anat Cohen, Allison Miller and more. Get your tickets now at HollywoodBowl.com.



- End of chapter one - LAURE TRONDINGEN



THE ART OF

ATTENTION

Hank Willis Thomas is traveling.

This time he's in Oregon to install the first major retrospective of his work, at the Portland Art Museum. On view through January 12, 2020, the exhibit will travel to Arkansas in February and Cincinnati in July. It's a major achievement for the 43-year-old artist, a career milestone he has worked up to ever since earning his MFA from California College of the Arts in 2004. Throughout his career, Thomas has developed a reputation as one of America's most versatile and outspoken artists, using photography, sculpture, video and collaborative public art projects to raise awareness about social justice and civil rights. That range might stem, in part, from what Thomas calls "some form of ADHD."

"When I look at my survey show, it's like, Oh wow, that's definitely a broad spectrum of work," he says. "I've always hoped that people can see the connections."

A black artist who draws extensively on advertising, nostalgia and other outgrowths of pop culture, Thomas keeps his Brooklyn studio lined with shelves of meticulously organized boxes packed with back issues of iconic black culture magazines such as *Ebony* and *Jet*, as well as retro campaign buttons and other source material. His early photographic work suggests that the collective consciousness of any society is reflected in its advertising. The poignant 2003 series *Branded*, for example, features photographs of black men marked with the Nike swoosh logo to comment on the relationships among

advertising, race and consumerism.

Thomas has also explored popular entertainment, using the spectacle of professional sports as a metaphor for racism, corruption and violence. *The Cotton Bowl*, from his 2011 photo series *Strange Fruit*, juxtaposes images of a sharecropper and a black football player. The pairing serves to expose the similarities between African slaves, whose unpaid labor made generations of white Americans wealthy, and the descendants of slaves, whose unpaid work on college football teams enriches the mostly white executives of the billion-dollar sports-entertainment industry.

His sculptural pieces are no less politically charged. *We the People*, from 2015, uses patterned tapestries woven from decommissioned prison uniforms as a thinly veiled criticism of a criminal justice system that disproportionately incarcerates minorities and people of color. His 2014 sculpture *Raise Up*, which features cast bronze figures reaching for the sky, was created in response to the killing of unarmed black men at the hands of police and is now a permanent part of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. (The Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim and, internationally, the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia have also acquired his work.)

Speaking on the phone ahead of the Portland exhibit's opening, Thomas explains that he felt compelled to be an artist, and it's easy to see why. His mother, Deborah Willis, is a renowned photographer, a MacArthur "genius" grant recipient, a Guggenheim Fellow and current professor and chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. "I can only imagine that the

conversations around the dinner table must have been really interesting," says Jack Shainman, Thomas's New York dealer. "I think Hank is much further along in terms of evolution and race than a lot of us, just because he grew up in a household that was always discussing that."

Influenced by his mother's exploration of truth and reality, the artist's early work, such as his 1997 photo series *A Thousand Words...*, focuses on how the framing of images can influence context and how their meaning changes depending on what's included or left out of the frame.

A terrifying crime proved to be a turning point in Thomas's life and career. The artist's cousin, Songha Willis, was murdered during a violent robbery in Philadelphia in February 2000. In the aftermath, Thomas's resolve crystallized. "When my cousin was murdered, I felt I needed to make art that could change the world in a more intentional way," he says.

The killing inspired Thomas to focus his energy on addressing social issues. At the same time, a rapidly changing

Opening pages: Crossroads
2012, digital print and Plex with
Lumistyle film in collaboration with
Sanford Biggers. Right: Raise Up
2014, bronze. Below: The Cotton
Bowl, 2011, digital print.



technological landscape encouraged the trained photographer to broaden his perspective. "Most of the technical things I learned, like processing film and printing, became irrelevant," he says. "All I was left with was a way of looking at and critiquing images, so a lot of my work moved away from taking the perfect picture and toward reconsidering and reframing historical images. It has kind of taken me from photography to painting to video to sculpture to social practice."

The importance of Thomas's work, according to Julia Dolan, co-curator of the Portland show, lies in the way he excavates the past to make sense of

the present. "The way he addresses the founding issues of this country is so critical to the dialogue we're having on a national scale today," she says. "We are often surprised by how his work dealing with race and bias becomes more and more relevant. He really thinks about structures in society that hold folks down, hold folks back and privilege some over others."

At a time when activism and civic engagement can be fashionable and superficial, Thomas has proven himself a uniquely active participant in the civic life within and beyond his own community. "I realized there are a lot of noncreative people shaping our reality and designing policies and laws that aren't creative," Thomas says. "And there are a lot of creative people who have abdicated their responsibility in shaping the narratives that our culture is founded on."

In 2018, For Freedoms, a super PAC Thomas founded in 2016 with his friend and collaborator Eric Gottesman, worked with





Left: *We the People*, 2015, quilt made out of decommissioned prison uniforms. **Opposite page:** *Your Skin Has the Power to Protect You*, 2008, lightbox print.

more than 100 artists—including JR, Marilyn Minter, Rashid Johnson, Tania Bruguera and Theaster Gates—to take over nearly 200 billboards across all 50 states, as well as D.C. and Puerto Rico. Artists were asked to pick an issue they cared about and make a statement that could help viewers see the world in a new light.

“Working with artists is like herding feral cats, and I say that as an artist myself,” Gottesman jokes. “It was ambitious, exciting and on a scale nobody has ever really done before.”

Thomas also serves on the New York City Public Design Commission, an 11-member panel of experts appointed by the mayor, which reviews permanent architecture, landscape architecture and art proposals for city-owned property. According to the *New York Post*, Thomas was a vocal advocate for replacing a number of Central Park public monuments of men with those of women. “These decisions that have shaped our lives have been made by urban planners and policy makers for centuries,” he says. “Who is important? Who deserves to be seen, and who doesn’t?”

The same questions are being raised by art institutions and a fine art industry that has excluded minorities and women for decades. This is starting to change. But like most change in the rigidly conservative art world, it’s happening slowly. A 2018 study conducted by *Artnet News* and the art blog *In Other Words* found that just 2.3 percent of all artwork acquired (either by purchase or through donation) by 30 U.S. museums from 2008 to 2018 has been by African Americans, and that African American artists make up a mere 1.2 percent of global auction sales. These startling figures illustrate the critical role artists such as Thomas play in increasing the visibility of black artists within both the American institutional landscape and the international marketplace for contemporary art.

Thomas’s personal stance toward equality in the art world is not quite what his politically charged work suggests. “There are always people who are excluded and exploited,”

he acknowledges, “and we all need to be wide awake to our participation in ignoring important things and people.” However, he continues, “the more interesting stuff always happens outside the mainstream conversation, and so I don’t think we should all be rushing so quickly to be accepted by the status quo. I do recognize that I am now part of the status quo, and I have a responsibility to improve it. That includes working hard toward greater inclusion and knowing that the work is never over.”

For all his enthusiasm for civic engagement and civil rights — both in his work and in his activism — Thomas’s chosen mediums and conceptually rigorous approach translate into market prices that fall below those of many other artists of his generation.





I AM.
AMEN.

Left: Am Amen 2009, Liquitex
on canvas Opposite page Branded
Head 2003 Lambda photograph

these two things and merge them to make pieces that don't look like anybody else's — which is really important today too, since there have been so many artists who have come before us."

Grammy winning hip hop producer Swizz Beatz has been a collector of Thomas's work since 2018. "I first saw his amazing work online, and it was so epic," he says via e-mail. "At first sight, what grabbed me was the bold and artistic expressions in his work. Hank is a leader, a teacher, and super forwardthinking when it comes to culture and politics. I've seen Hank's growth, he's made many new big steps, and I'm super proud of him in so many ways. I feel that Hank is reflective of the future of the arts now."

Thomas's busy upcoming year is likely to give his market a boost. Asked about the demand for his work, he's ambivalent, explaining that prices "are not an actual tangible indicator of value per se." But, he admits, "we've been trained to value things that are more expensive, so when you make something people think is expensive, it automatically becomes historic and important."

Much of Thomas's work puts its metaphorical finger directly into the wound and urges its viewers to engage in difficult conversations; presumably this particular brand of candor doesn't sit well with many art collectors, who are disproportionately white. But the artist has no plans to make his work more palatable for the market. "I only know how to be me," he says. "I don't separate my art from my life."

While Thomas's outspokenness is a key part of his role as an artist, it has gotten him into trouble too. In September 2018, South African photographer Graeme Williams accused the American artist of copying his photograph of black schoolchildren and white police officers, an image that became a symbol of the end of apartheid. Speaking to *The Guardian*, Williams insisted that the changes in Thomas's whited-out version were "minimal" and accused the artist of "theft, plagiarism [and] appropriation."

Responding to the accusations, Thomas asks, "How do we in the age of mass and digital reproduction talk about history and visual culture?" He adds, "In books you can put quotation marks around words, attribute it to someone, and it's okay." In

At a time
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visual art, he argues, notions of authorship and the lines between appropriation and plagiarism are much harder to trace.

Perhaps this blurring of authorial boundaries is related to his willingness to collaborate. Thomas readily admits that much of his creative process is brainstormed, delegated and outsourced to historians, fabricators, writers, graphic designers and illustrators. "I think of myself more like an art director than a traditional fine artist," he says. This is more common than it sounds. Like Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and many of the masters who came before them, contemporary artists including Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Yayoi Kusama maintain large workshops and studios in order to meet market demand.

Dolan says Thomas's collaborative instinct stems from his essential human curiosity. "He's very interested in what other people think," she says. "He really wants to hear others and understand how they see the world to explore how his perceptions might be helped, changed or enhanced by listening and collaborating."

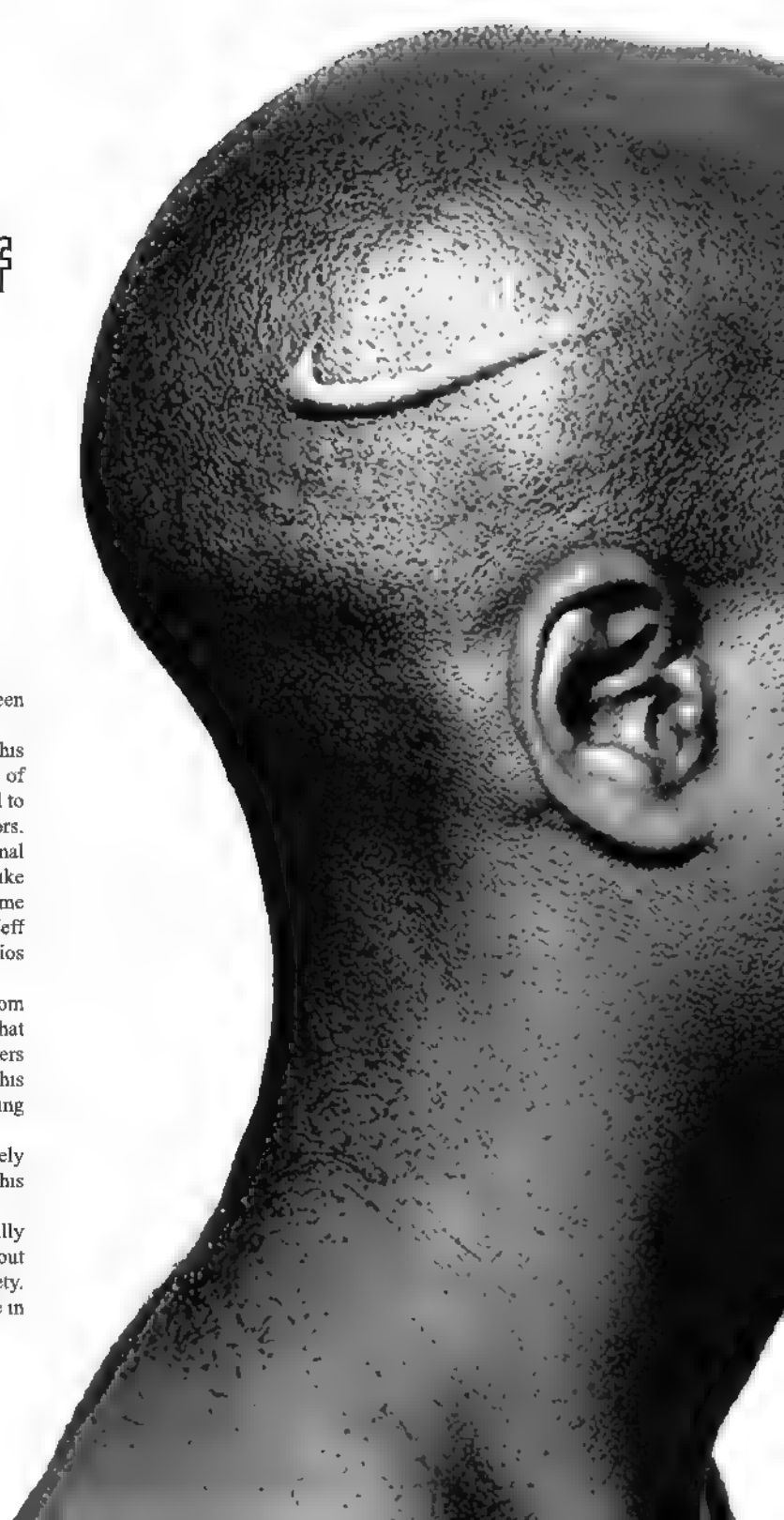
Thomas's inquisitive nature and dizzying range ultimately serve a dual purpose perfectly summed up by Gottesman, his friend for almost 20 years.

"I think he's aware of the power of attention. That's really what his work is all about," Gottesman says. "It's about criticizing how attention is garnered by larger forces in society. So on a personal level he's always trying to bring other people in and bring new voices into the conversation."

In the art world, an artist's auction record can be a reliable barometer of the market's demand for their work. Artists who work across fewer mediums and approach their craft from a more decorative or colorful perspective — such as Johnson, Kehinde Wiley (who painted Barack Obama's official portrait) and Mickalene Thomas — have all achieved higher auction prices than Thomas. The highest ever price paid for a work by Wiley is \$300,000, Mickalene Thomas's top price is nearly \$700,000, and Johnson's high mark stands at \$1.16 million. In contrast, Thomas's auction record is \$75,000.

Shamman points out that sales aren't necessarily an indicator of quality or importance, explaining that photographs and editions, which account for the majority of Thomas's work, tend to be priced lower than original paintings.

"In order for an artist to be successful today, the work has to be about ideas and also be interesting aesthetically," Shamman says. "Hank is able to balance



LOVE
OVER
RULES



Opposite page: Love Over Rules
2018, neon **Above:** Jungle Fever
1991-2007, lightjet print, original
photographer unknown **Right:**
Guernica, 2016, mixed media with
sports jerseys



TURNING 40

Jolene Hexx





We're happy to have you featured on Playboy! Can you give us a bit of a background on your career as a model and where it all started?

When I was a teenager, I attended a music festival in Chicago and was scouted by someone from a prominent modeling school at the time.

I auditioned and earned a scholarship to attend their school, which is the start of my passion for this industry. The school refined me as a model and actor and started me down the casting call road. After some time, I was fortunate enough to get represented by an agency and did some commercial work and runway modeling in New York. I decided to move to Las Vegas and opted to become a freelance talent. That changed my life and career dramatically. I was self-managed and it opened a lot of doors I never could have imagined. Among the gigs I landed were:

- Workshop modeling and concept photographers, which allowed me to travel the country and do a bit of international travel. As well as work with some incredible artists who I now call my friends.

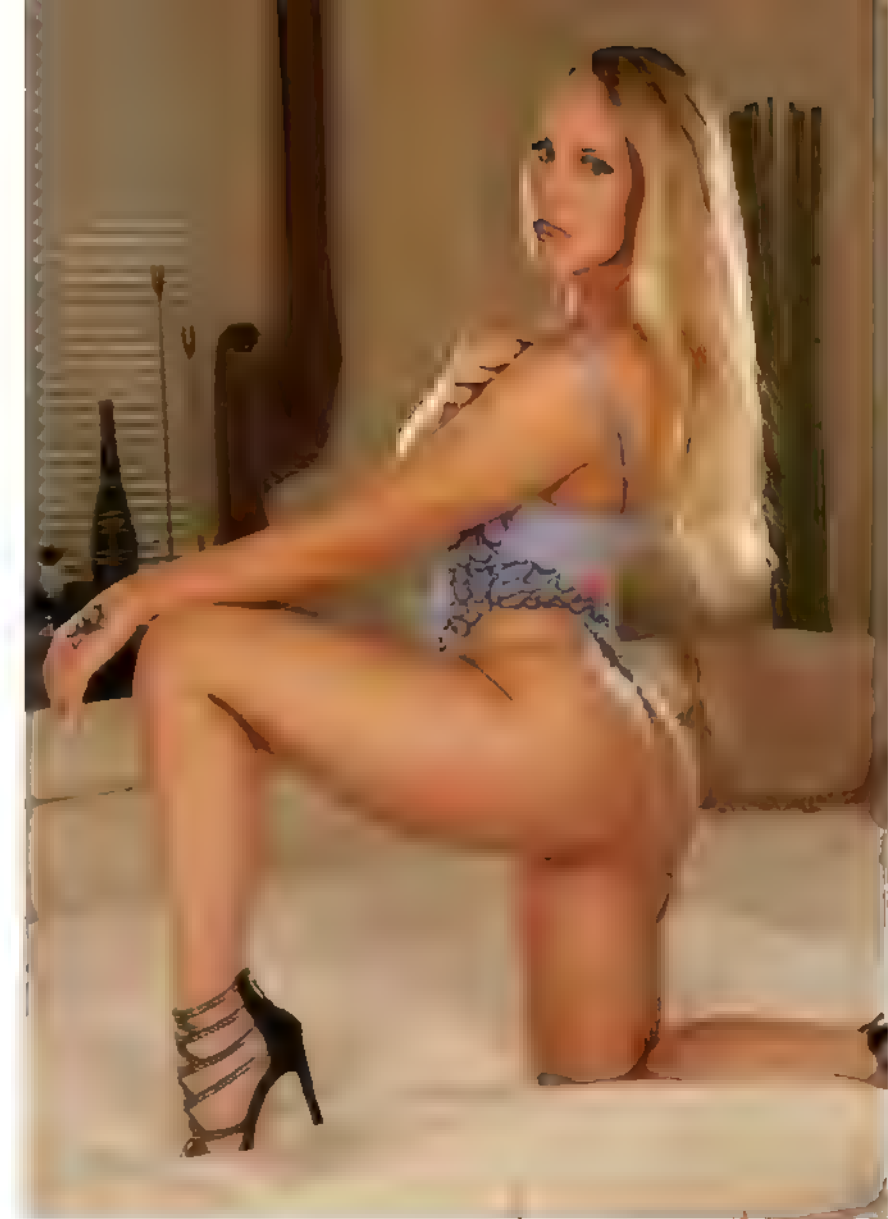
- Fetish modeling/acting, which I continue to work in to this day. It began with my perfect feet and from there opened the doors to so many areas in fetish modeling that I couldn't have imagined. Among those are bondage, giantess, cannibalism, inflation, wrestling, trampling, scissors, bb, etc. encourage you to search me up on clips4sale if you are curious on what any of those niches are.

- Independent film work, which I love and look forward to doing more of. I've appeared in passion projects done by hobbyists who love making art and those who are looking to submit their works to various film festivals.

Having a full schedule must make it difficult for you to get much alone time, talk to us about the top 3 must-dos to ensure you fit in some well-deserved downtime? I'm very regimented which enables me to reach my personal and professional goals. My non-negotiables are waking my Doodle, meditating and doing my workouts to stay in shape and keep me on top of my game.

I generally work five to six days a week and considering all of my personal and professional obligations, I usually am grinding an average of 12 hours a day. It leaves little time for me and is a lot to handle at times. So I definitely look forward to enjoying my vacations, which I take a few times a year.

What does it mean for you to be seen as a strong, intelligent, ambitious woman? I hold myself to a high standard. It means a lot to me that the people in my life see and understand the effort put into being my best on a daily basis. I'm proud that the photographers and the producers regularly work with praise my professionalism and the simple fact I manage to show up on time ready to work.



What are some of the biggest misconceptions people have about what you do? I get curiosity more than misconceptions. The world I have found myself in is truly fascinating and keeps me inquisitive, as well. I'm surprised even with all of my experience in this field at some of the job offers I receive! The public at large really has no clue about the fetish industry. People seem to be fascinated when they hear what my days are like and the things I encounter on the job. That leads to a lot of smiles and a lot more questions.

What does freedom of self-expression mean to you? As a freelancer, I have the option to pick and choose the jobs I take. I get opportunities to travel and do things I'm interested in. This is my passion to make art and fall into character roles. One day I'm a superhero and the next day I'm playing a murderer. The diversity is awesome.

We absolutely love your Instagram,

your content is very dynamic, inspirational, and downright sexy, could you perhaps tell us what your personal experience as an influencer has been like? My IG is certainly random. I'm not sure about influential. LOL! Entertaining? Yes. Sexy? Hell yes. Violent? Yes again. It is a lot of those things behind the scenes, as well. It's hilarious that while there are so many of my fans who love looking at my feet, there are just as many who don't get foot fetish and question it. It's funny to make some people scratch their heads and others scratch their... you know what depending on the post. But stay tuned and eventually I'll make a full circle for my diverse audience.

3 things that you can't go a day without.

- I can't go a day without a good laugh. I give bonus points to the things that make me laugh so hard I nearly pee myself.
- I am always looking for opportunities.



to be a good person, whether that is paying it forward in the coffee line or picking up some groceries for a person in need.

• And like I said before, walking my dog is a must. Enjoying the natural beauty like a breathtaking sunrise, an amazing sunset, marveling at the majestic mountains in the distance, and enjoying the smell of wet grass are some of my favorite things when I'm walking Viva.

What about those crazy DMs you must receive? Care to share a few funny stories regarding those? My DMs are unhinged! They run the gamut from wedding proposals to people asking me to break their bones. I've had men ask me to castrate them, stand on their faces, stomp them, and other outrageous fantasy world requests! My fans are overall complimentary and cool. It's rare

to encounter the run-of-the-mill jackass. My DMs are never boring.

Now we're sure you experience a lot of male attention on and offline, any advice you would like to give to men out there who are hoping to catch your eye the right way? It weirds me out when people try to be seductive or enticing me. But I love meeting cool people with great stories... so be interesting and not creepy.

What is the absolute worst thing a man can do to completely put you off? I include women in this answer, too. I'm repulsed by people who are unnecessarily rude. If you're an asshole or a bully, you're not going to get any positive attention from me. Part of what I do in work is humiliation and domination, but there's a big difference between fanta-

sies and one's behavior in the real world.

That said, what advice would you have to give to all women out there when it comes to love and relationships? The best advice I have ever received is not to be okay for okay's sake. This means taking inventory of the energy exchange in a relationship, whether it's intimate or friendships. If things are unbalanced, adjust or cut, as necessary.

Thank you so much for sitting down with us and letting us get to know you! Any last words for our readers out there? I want to sincerely thank the supporters of Playboy for keeping this incredible brand the icon in publication that it is. And express what an unbelievable honor it is to be one of the many wonderful women to grace the cover and pages.



Your First Pet and the Street You Grew Up On

She's not quite
man's best
friend

ILLUSTRATION BY
KILEY REID

ILLUSTRATION BY
CASEY WELDON

When I came back to Tucson for Christmas break, my mom was like, “You need to clean out your closet or you’re not going anywhere.” This was her way of being dumb about the fact that I’d gained a few pounds since I’d started college, but I was like *fine* ‘cause it was whatever I was going to buy new shit anyway. My high school friends were having a reunion, Aaron Trujillo was going to be there, and I was obviously going too. So I took a huge trash bag into my closet and started filling it up with stuff I hadn’t worn or touched in years. But when I pulled out a very old Halloween costume from when my high school friends and I were Bath & Body Works flavors, underneath it, there was Magenta.

“Oh my God.”

“Oh Jesus.” She put her little claw in front of her face. “Shit. That’s—that’s a lot of light...”

“Magenta?”

The plastic cage sat on a shelf next to my old yearbooks and duffel bags. It looked exactly the same. Neon pipes, pink hamster wheel, some toilet paper tubes and a shit ton of mulch. But Magenta was different. She looked a few years older than me, or maybe just more mature. There was new white fur underneath her eyes.

When I was little she walked quietly on all fours, but now she stood up like she had somewhere to be. On top of her gray fur Magenta wore a silky floral robe that she kept fixing and a teeny pair of Uggs that looked like they’d been in the rain. She held her robe closed, and then she waved.

“What are you...how are you still here?”

“Hey, Natalie.” Magenta half laughed, “Hey — listen, this doesn’t have to be weird. You grew up, you know? You had other things to do. And honestly, I totally understand.” She pushed a tuft of fur behind her left ear.

I sat down on my bed. It was weird being back in my room with all of the Got Milk? ads and *Moulin Rouge!* posters taped on the wall above my twin bed. I couldn’t remember the last time I saw Magenta, but it must have been when I still had braces and before my hair was red, which seemed like forever ago. I knew I was bad at remembering things (what time my classes were, if I took my birth control, quesadillas in the microwave), but I didn’t think I was this bad. “Why do I remember you dying?”

“Ummm...” Magenta winced and I saw all four of her teeth. “Maybe because a lot of your friends’ pets died?”

“How would you even know that?”

“You’re really loud on the phone.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Ohmygosh, don’t be. It used to give, like, a rhythm to my day. Back when you still lived here.”

Magenta peeked in her pocket and I saw the glow of a tiny cellphone light up inside. She looked back up at me and smiled.

“Well,” I said. “Should I feed you or something? Do you need new water?”

“I mean...” Magenta laughed again. “If you want...?”

I stared at my hands on my lap.

“Well, I don’t eat stimulants anymore, and I try to stay away from dairy,” she said. “So actually, as far as food’s concerned,

I’m honestly all set.”

I had five more days until I went back to school. I kept my closet door open because it felt awful to think of closing it. Magenta made a really big deal of putting her headphones on when I talked on the phone. When I changed my clothes she’d bury herself under a bunch of mulch or pick up a tiny fashion magazine. I knew she was trying to make me comfortable, but it just made me feel worse.

I asked my mom how long she’d been feeding Magenta.

“Well, honey, I don’t *feed* Magenta.” She laughed like this was a psycho thing to do. “It’s not like she’s a child. She just makes her grocery list and I pick up a few things.”

But it wasn’t just a few things. My mom wrapped a tiny iTunes gift card and put it underneath the tree. While we watched *The Devil Wears Prada* on DVD, she sat on the floor and made a mini version of those holiday buckets, the ones with three different kinds of popcorn, and she barely laughed or quoted

all the parts we used to love, like when Meryl Streep is all *Why is no one readyyyy?* Or we’d be walking in the mall and she’d want to make “a really quick stop” at some weird, expensive doll store. She’d take forever, and I’d be like, “Mom.” She’d be like, “Well, honey, Magenta can get *cold*.”

I couldn’t wait to go back to Phoenix.

At my dorm I was fucking hilarious. I didn’t have class on Fridays. My roommates and I got blackout on the reg. And I did this super funny impression of our dorm’s security guard as if he’d just won a million dollars. Or it’s

more like if he accidentally won a million dollars and he was just finding out. It sounds weird when I say it now, but I swear everyone dies for it. In Tucson I had nothing to say.

Every time I tried to tell my mom about the cool shit I was doing back home in the dorms (growing basil out my window, getting a B in finance), she’d be like, “Well, *excuuuusee* me! I guess I was mistaken, because I thought *this* was your home.”

...

Lara Brumski was having the reunion at her parents’ house. I had to buy a size large, but whatever, I looked good. Still, every time I looked at Aaron Trujillo, he was looking down at his phone. I remembered how it felt when he said Atta girl to me at graduation, when I parallel parked Lara Brumski’s truck on the first try, and I just wished he would bring it up, or that someone would arrive and really need their truck parallel parked.

The only time he talked to me at the reunion was after I said I’d seen *The Blind Side* with my mom. “You actually saw that movie?”

He was sitting on the kitchen counter and both his shoes were untied, on purpose. I sucked my stomach in. “Yeah, it wasn’t that bad.”

“It is that bad,” he said. He scratched the side of his shaved head. “It’s another one of those movies where white people come in and save the day. And it’s like, ‘Oh hey, black people, you can be like us! Be like us and then we’ll like you!’ It’s bullshit.”

Lara Brumski grinned at me over her beer. “Didn’t you say you cried?”

“Umm, no,” I lied. “I said my mom cried.”

Later, in Lara Brumski’s backyard, I thought that maybe I

could fix it by drinking more. But then, in the space between Aaron and me, his phone lit up. It said *Message from MAGENTA*. Next to the *M* was a pink heart emoji, and a little mouse face was next to the *A*. My chest suddenly felt like it wasn’t even there.

I stood up. “Are you serious right now?”

Aaron said, “Natalie, chill.” As I walked out of the backyard, I heard him go, “It’s not like anything’s happened,” but it didn’t really seem like he was saying this to me.

Lara Brumski was standing with beers in both her hands as I walked through the kitchen and took the keys from my purse. She looked past me to the sliding glass doors and mouthed to someone, “Oh shit, he told her?”

...

Magenta was in pajamas and eating popcorn when I came home. I closed my bedroom door, laid facedown on my bed and began to sob into my sheets.

Magenta said, “Oh God,” and then, “Natalie, wait.”

I heard her little nails tap at the side of the cage. The sound made my lungs all tight and scrunched up.

“Natalie, listen,” she said. “Okay wait, I swear to God? Aaron is just a friend.”

I sniffed and turned away from her.

“I’m serious,” she said. “He’s so random and completely not my type. But even if he was, I’d never do that to you.”

I put my hands underneath my face.

“Natalie, don’t cry.” And then she kind of laughed. “You’re gonna make me cry. Do you want to come feed me a little bit?”

I shook my head.

“Come on, like old times! Remember? Man, I’m *staarrved*. What am I gonna do?” As she said this, she was sort of singing.

I sat up straight. If I was really so loud on the phone, then Magenta knew how I’d gone down on Aaron in his car in the rec center parking lot on the Fourth of July, how I begged him to at least think about visiting me at college and how it was only two hours away. “Okay,” I said. I crossed my arms. “Okay, yeah. I’d like to feed you.”

Magenta laughed and said, “Really?” It was clear she thought I was joking, but when I didn’t wipe the snot away from my face — I let it drip down onto my skirt — Magenta closed her mouth and walked to her bowl.

I went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. I ripped off a stalk of some hard, green broccoli from the bottom drawer. My mom was watching *Law & Order: SVU* when I passed by the living room. When she saw the broccoli in my hand, she said, “Good for you, Nat!” Before I slammed my door I went, “Shut up, Mom!”

I threw the broccoli into Magenta’s cage.

“Okay. Cooool.” Magenta nodded slowly. She looked up at me and bit her bottom lip. “Can I be so annoying and ask for some olive oil?”

“No,” I said. “I want you to eat it like old times.”

Magenta blew through her lips. She walked to the broccoli, the bedding crunched beneath her, and she took a small floret in her hand.

“No,” I said. “On all fours.”

We stared at each other for what seemed like a long time. We did this until Magenta bent down and began to crawl around the broccoli. She looked as if she were in a game of charades or pretending to steal cookies from a jar that she was more than welcome to have in the first place. I felt like I was watching an adult do the hokey pokey with a child who wasn’t theirs — putting their left arm in and their left arm out — at a birthday party they were obligated to attend.

Magenta took a bite. “Okay, umm, squeak squeak?” she said. “Thank you, Natalie. Yummers. Squeak squeak.”

I sat down on the floor and hugged my legs.

How was I so fucking fat? Since when had my mom started doing arts and crafts? And did Aaron Trujillo really hate texting as much as he’d told me he did? Because it kind of seemed like he didn’t.

Magenta came to the side of the cage and her face looked careful and sad. “Do you feel better?” she asked. “Or not so much.”

I shook my head and said, “Not so much.”

...

On my last night in Tucson, Lara Brumski texted me to say that she and Aaron made out and did some over the pants stuff in his parents’ garage on Christmas Eve. As I packed my bags, Magenta asked me if I was okay, and we ended up talking for hours. I played my old CDs (Amy Grant, Jewel, Tori Amos, Toni Braxton), and she showed me how she charted what she ate (breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks). It wasn’t as judgy as I’m making it sound. It was actually really nice.

Around midnight, I sat on my suitcase as Magenta organized her things. A little white bandanna was tied on her head, just above her ears. In a corner of her cage were three tiny boxes. One was labeled toss, one said keep, and the last one said donate.

“Hey, just to put it out there,” I said, “You could drive back to Phoenix with me tomorrow. I have a closet in my dorm.”

Magenta stood up and pushed her fur behind her ears. “Really?”

“It would be cool,” I said. “You could even come to class if you wanted.”

Obviously Magenta could be a little much, but we had history. Maybe she could help me get up in the morning since she was such an early riser. Maybe I could try some of her healthy eating habits. I felt like I could never forgive Aaron Trujillo and Lara Brumski, but I was the one who forgot Magenta was alive, and she seemed to have forgiven me. Most important, Magenta had always been mine to begin with.

“You know what?” she said. She partially closed one of her eyes.

“I think that sounds really fun.”

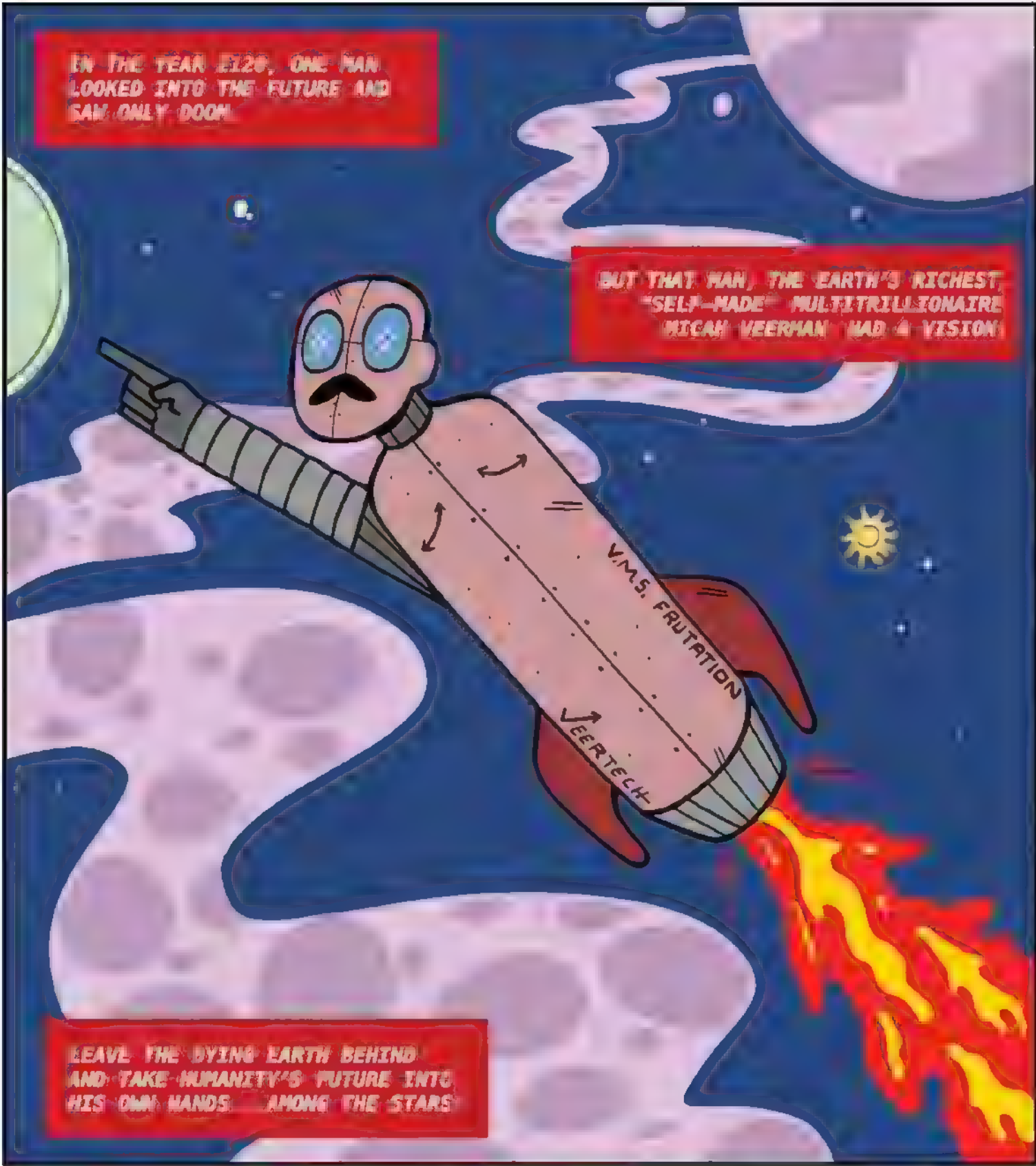
“Really?”

“Yeah,” she said. “You know what, why not? I’m gonna pack my stuff and get my cage ready to go. A change of scenery would be really good for me right now.”

But the next morning, Magenta was gone. Her cage was so empty that when I walked over to it, the wheel spun around once by itself. She’d left me a little note that I read using the magnifying glass my mom had on her key chain. Magenta had gotten an internship at a magazine I’d never heard of; she was hoping to be hired soon after, and she was moving in with friends. She hadn’t had the heart to tell me, but she wanted to catch up with me soon, when everything cooled down and her schedule wasn’t so all over the place. She wished me all the best.

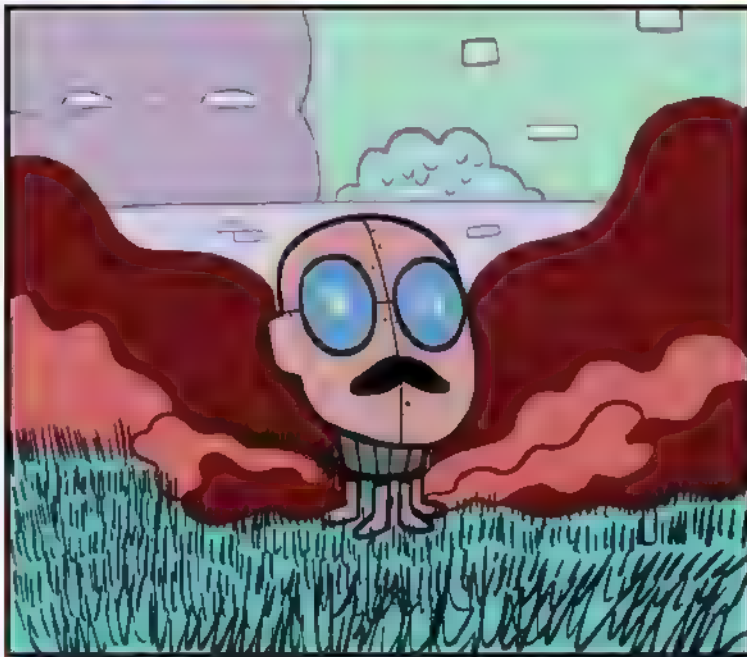
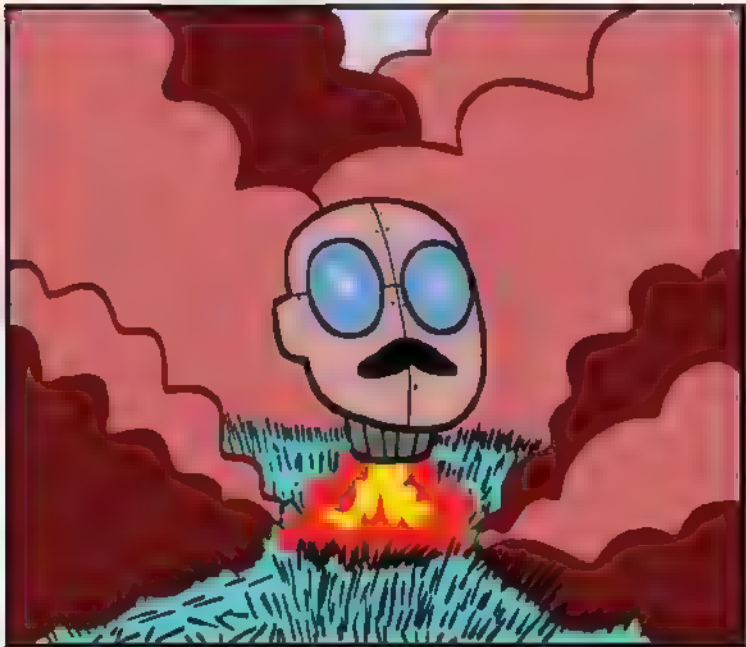
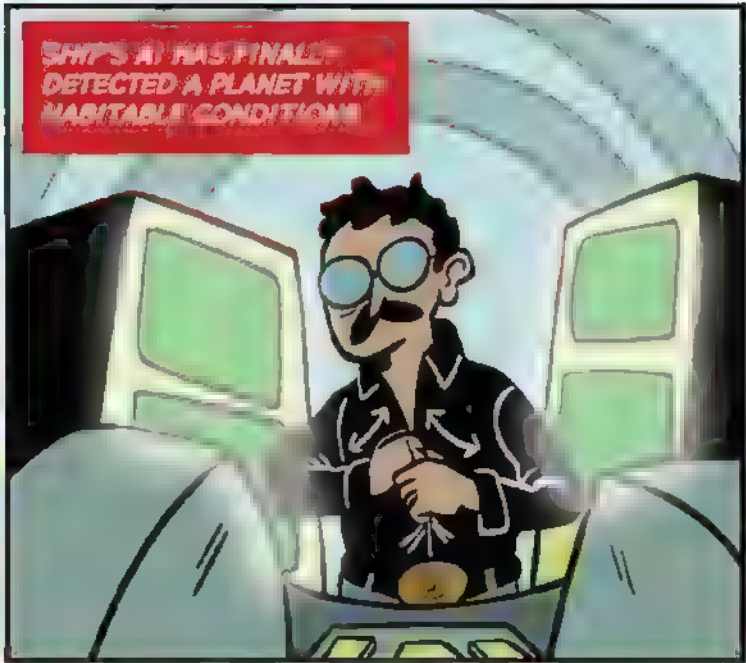
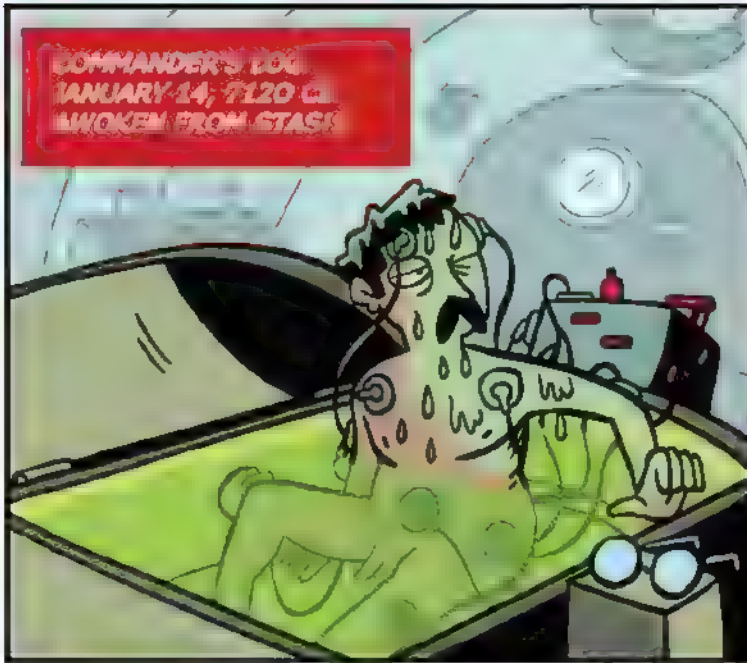
There are times I see knitted boots or a colorful robe in a dollstore window that I think Magenta would like. Something she can wear around the house. I stop and I think about sending them to her, saying something quick and nice in a card that I’d attach, but then I remember that she didn’t leave her address.

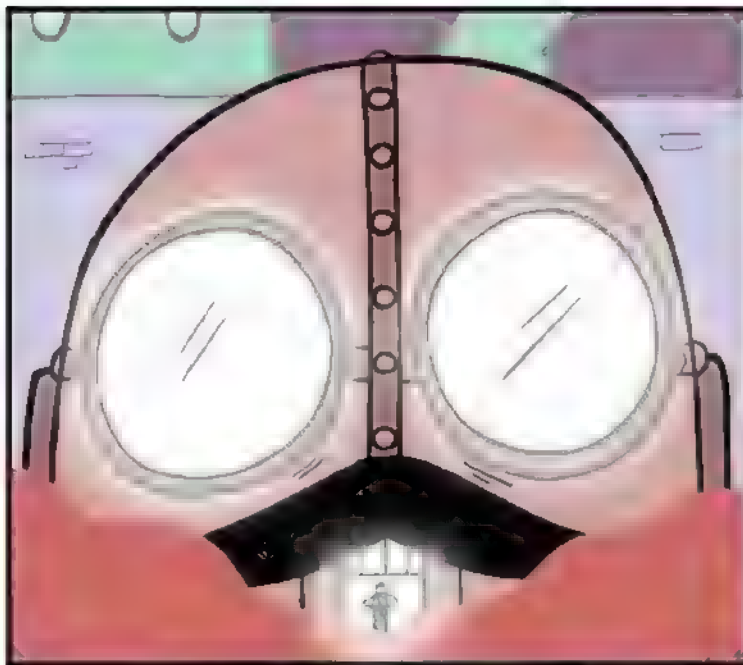
Writing down my meals actually works. I’ve lost four pounds, and now I’m kind of dying to see Magenta at brunch or at the places where the bartenders know my name, but I also know that these are places she’d probably never go. That Christmas, when I’d shown Magenta my impression of our dorm security guard winning a million dollars, she’d said, “Sorry...it kinda sounds like I’d have to be there.” ■



GAZILLIONAIRE: 7120

by MATT LUBCHANSKY

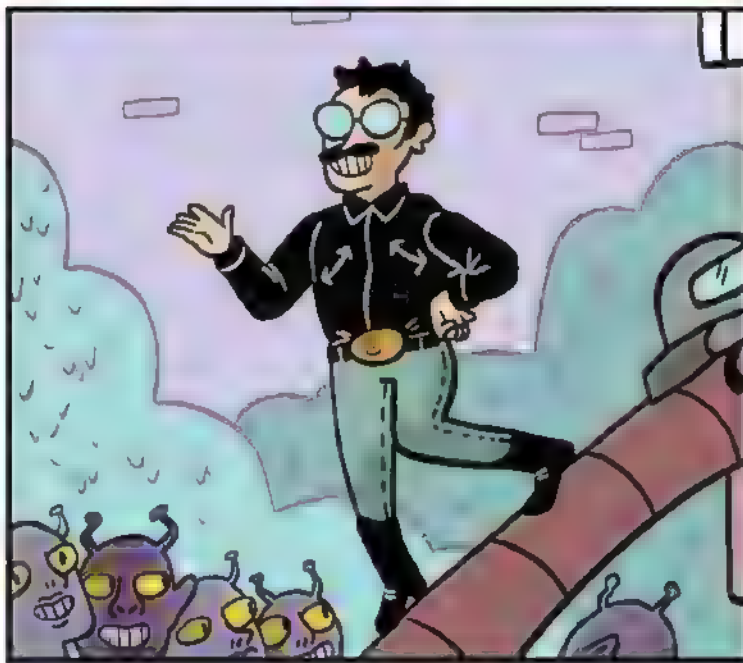




PLANET VEERMANU
APPEARS TO HAVE
INHABITANTS



GREETINGS! I
AM A TRAVELER --
FROM BEYOND
THE STARS!



THEY SEEM RECEPTIVE TO MY
PRESENCE -- I FORESEE RISING
HIGH IN THIS PRIMITIVE SOCIETY



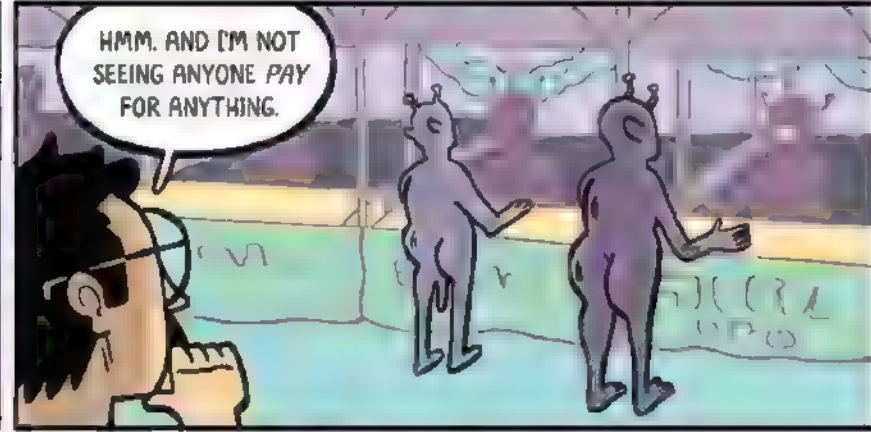
FEBRUARY 23 I'M BEING SHOWN AROUND SOME
KIND OF FESTIVAL. MY CONCERNS ARE MOUNTING

I CAN'T HELP BUT
NOTICE: WHAT GENDER
IS EVERYONE?

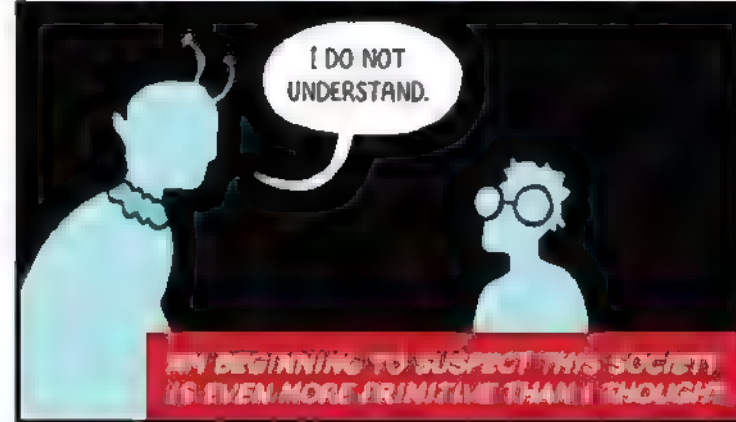
IT WOULD
HELP ME IN THAT
REGARD IF YOU ALL
WOULD WEAR SOME
CLOTHING..



I'M SORRY, MICAHVEERMAN, THAT WORD ISN'T
COMING THROUGH OUR TRANSLATORS. JENNDERR?



HMM. AND I'M NOT
SEEING ANYONE PAY
FOR ANYTHING.



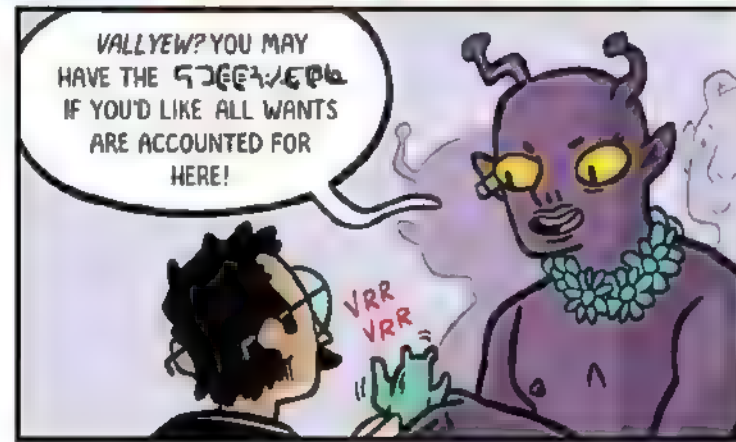
I DO NOT
UNDERSTAND.

AM BEGINNING TO SUSPECT THIS SOCIETY
IS EVEN MORE PRIMITIVE THAN I THOUGHT



WHAT'S THE
VALUE OF ONE OF
THESE THINGS?

THEY MOST LIKELY NEED MY STRONG HAND!



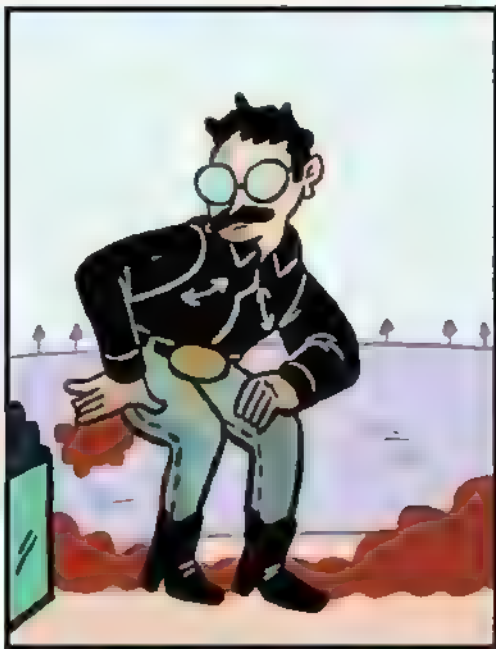
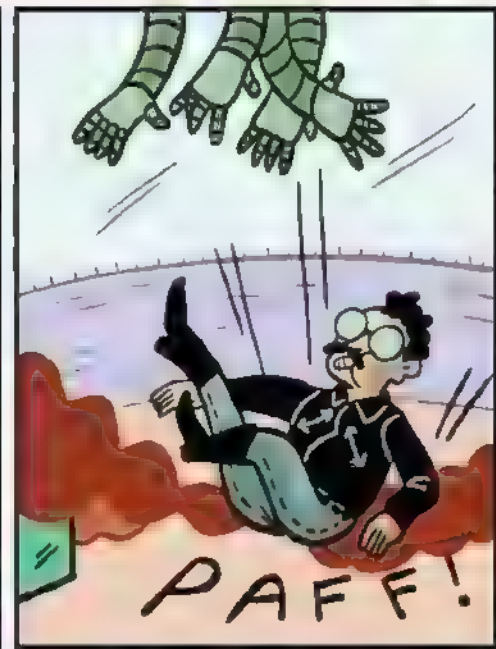
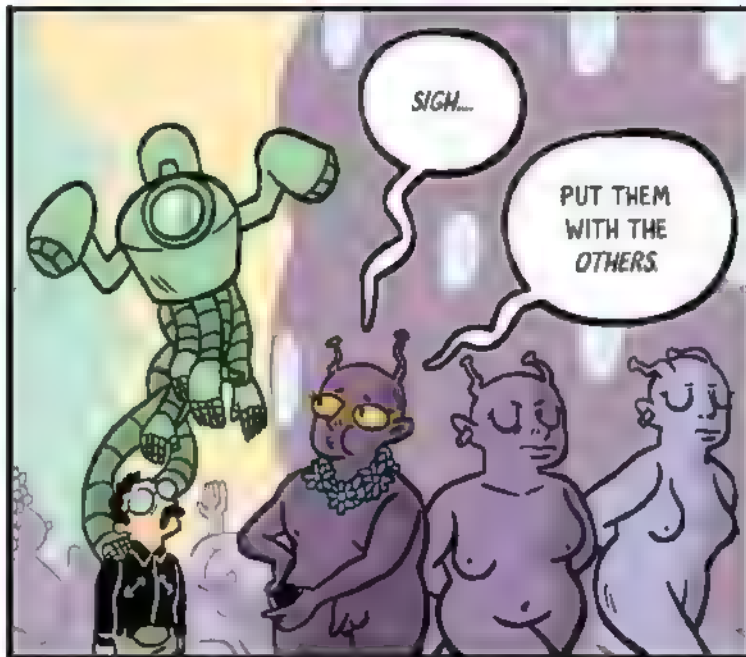
VALLYEW? YOU MAY
HAVE THE 576674676
IF YOU'D LIKE ALL WANTS
ARE ACCOUNTED FOR
HERE!

VRR
VRR



IT'S VERY
PLEASURABLE. SEE,
MICAHVEERMAN?

FOR MIKE IS THE
VERY HAND OF THE
FREE MARKET





Chasing Dreams

Mimi

Instagram @mimikickass

PR by @km3events





Tell us about the moment you found out you would be featured in the magazine. What was your initial reaction? When I first got the news, I could hardly believe it! I was so excited and proud of how far I've come. Being featured in Playboy is definitely a dream come true!

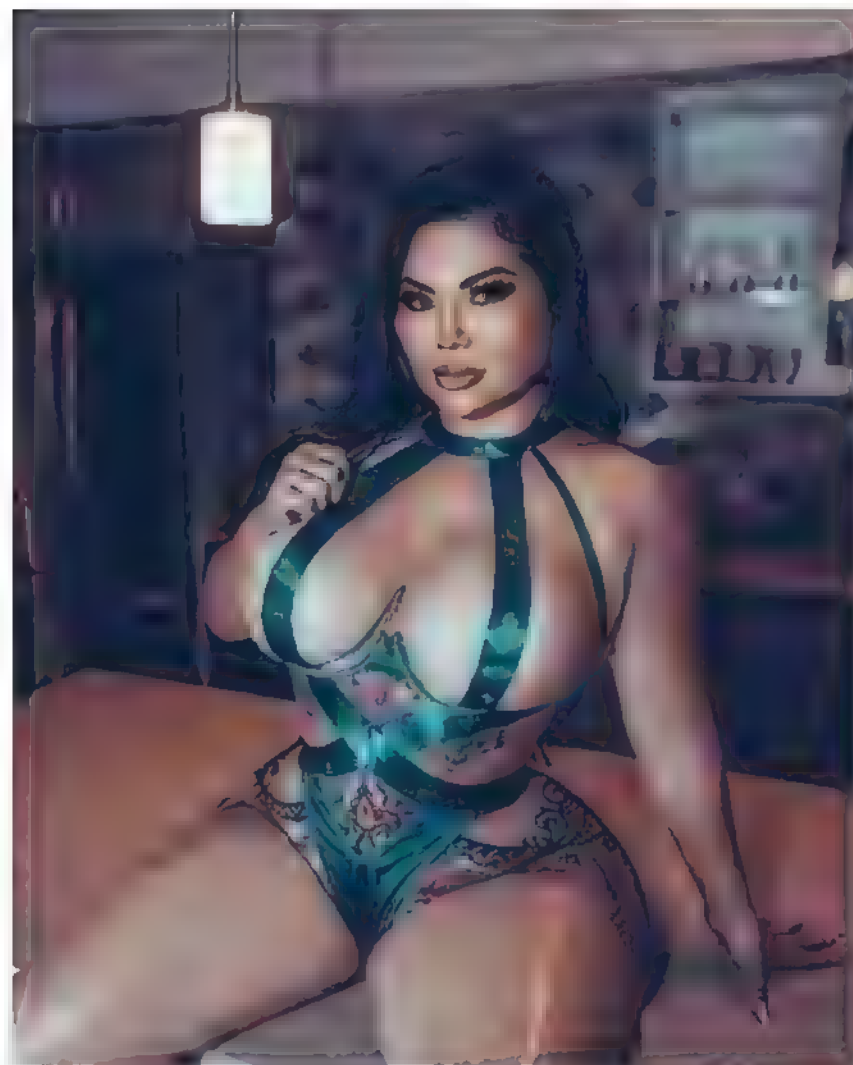
Can you share your favorite shot or spread from the magazine and why it holds special significance for you? There's one shot that stands out to me because it was my very first photo-shoot after successfully losing 40 lbs (18 kg). This photo represents all the hard work I put in, and it makes me feel incredibly confident.

When you're not working, what helps you decompress and relax? I love going to the gym and working out in my free time. It's a great way for me to stay in shape, clear my mind, and focus on my goals. Working out not only helps me physically, but it also boosts my confidence and mental strength.

What's the strangest fan encounter you've ever had? One of the strangest fan encounters I had was when I went to a restaurant, and the valet turned out to be a fan. He saw me pull up and literally froze, then started fumbling with my keys like he'd never seen a car before. He was so excited, that he gave me a little pep talk about how much he admired my work and even asked if I wanted a 'VIP parking spot'. I was like, buddy, you're already doing that, you're the valet! It was hilarious and definitely a moment I won't forget.

What's the best "wardrobe malfunction" story that you can now laugh about? One of my funniest wardrobe malfunctions happened at an event in Vegas. I was walking around, enjoying the night, when suddenly I heard a loud 'rip!' My dress had torn right down the back, right where my butt was. I tried to stay cool, but I couldn't help but laugh. Thankfully, my best friend was there and quickly saved the day by fixing it for me. It definitely made for a memorable moment, and we couldn't stop laughing about it all night.

What are some of your biggest dreams you hope to achieve? I'm originally from Japan, and one of my biggest dreams as a model is to work with top fashion brands and continue pushing my creativity in the industry. I also want to inspire others and keep



working towards my goals, no matter where they take me in the world.

What's the weirdest beauty tip or trick you've picked up? The weirdest beauty tip I've picked up came from my Japanese mom. When I was a teenager, she always told me to save the water from washing rice and use it to wash my face. At first, I didn't think much of it, but after trying it, I noticed my skin felt smoother and brighter. It's a traditional beauty trick that actually works.

If you were stranded on a deserted island with only one accessory, what would it be? If I were stranded on a deserted island and with only one accessory, I'd choose a sharp, reliable knife. It's practical, versatile, and would help me handle whatever comes my way. Plus, I'd definitely need it to open coconuts.

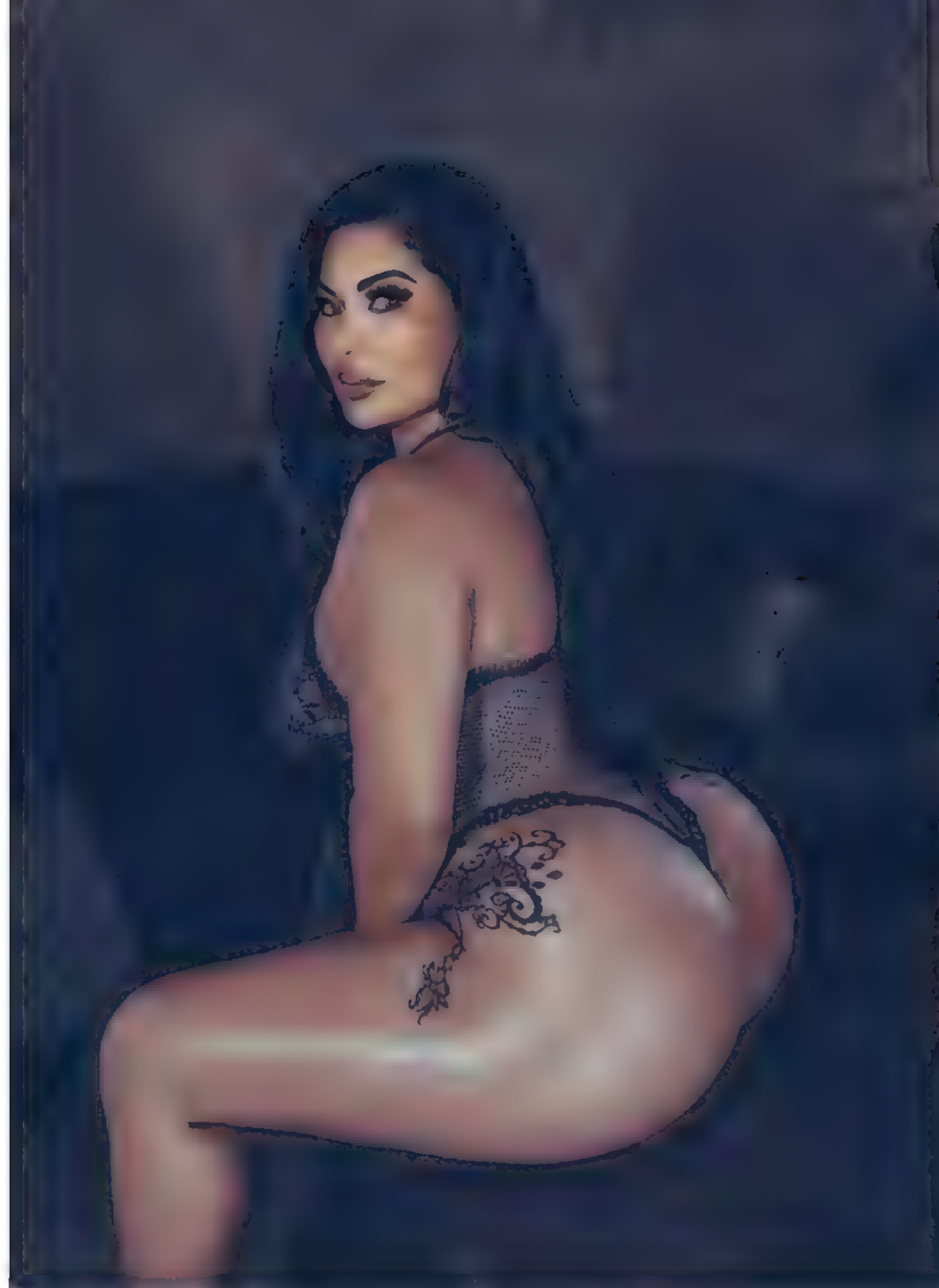
What's your go-to guilty pleasure snack? My go-to guilty pleasure snack is definitely Korean sweet and spicy puffs. They're the perfect mix of flavors—sweet, spicy, and totally addictive! I can never stop at just one.

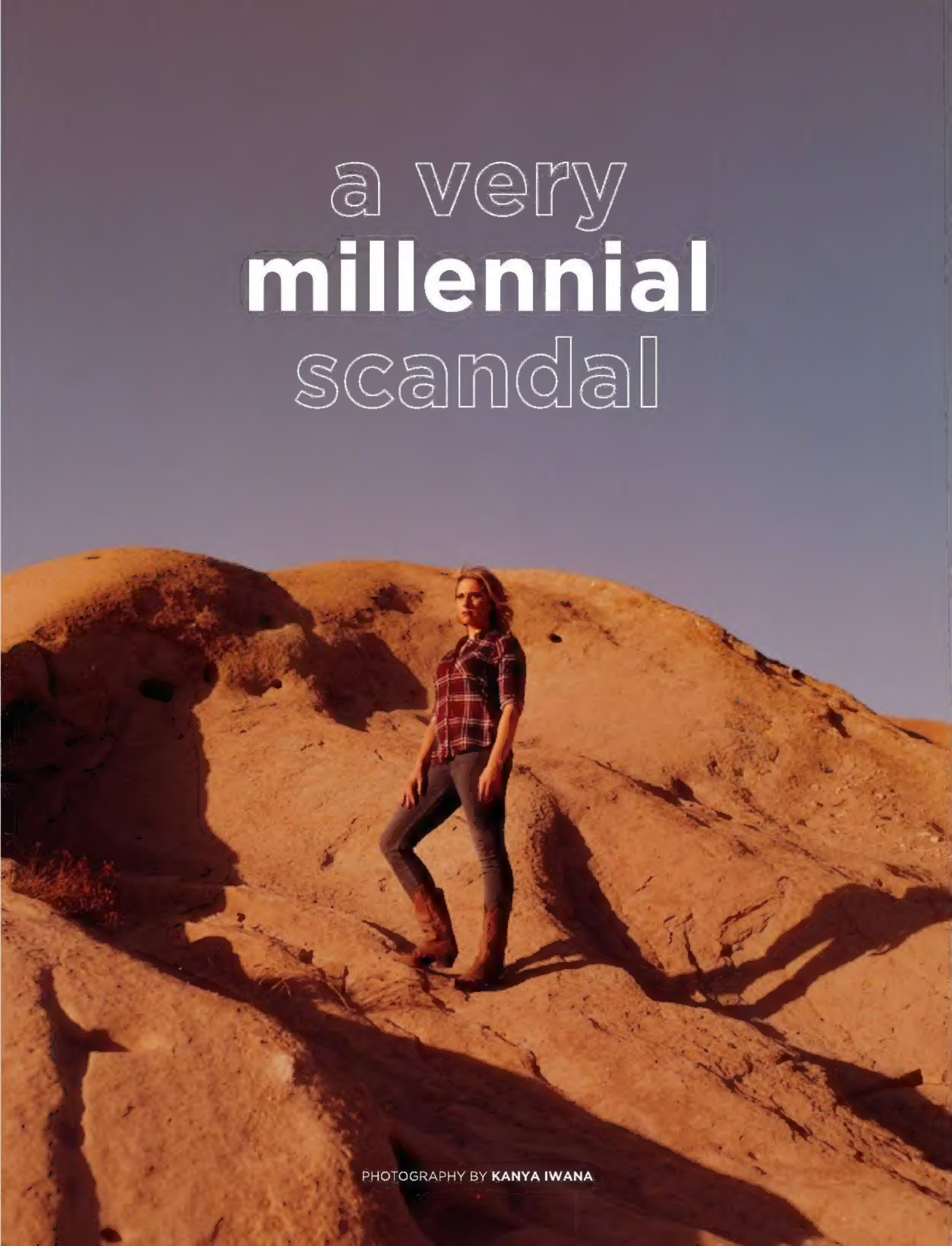
What is the absolute worst thing a man can do to completely put you off? The absolute worst thing a man can do to completely put me off is when his actions and words are not aligned. If someone says one thing but does another, it shows a lack of integrity, and that's a huge turn off for me.

What advice would you give to aspiring models? My advice to aspiring models is that no matter where you're from or how old you are, if you're passionate and dedicated, you can make it. Never stop believing in yourself and keep pushing toward your goals.

Thanks for taking the time to speak to us, do you have any last words to our readers and where can they find you? Thank you so much for taking the time to read this! To all the readers out there, never stop chasing your dreams and believe in the power of hard work. You can find me on Instagram @MimiKickass, where I share my journey and connect with my followers.





A woman with blonde hair, wearing a plaid shirt and jeans, stands on a sand dune in a desert landscape. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The dunes are golden-brown and have some shadows cast on them.

a very millennial scandal

**Sex, nudes and
social media took
down the woman
who represented
a moderate future
for Democrats.
Now she's ready
to stand up again,
freer than ever**

BY ANITA LITTLE

In early October, in the quiet commuter town of Santa Clarita, California, I spent a balmy afternoon with then congresswoman Katie Hill. It was exactly two weeks before intimate photos of her began to trickle out of the dark, far-right corners of the internet and about three weeks before she would announce her resignation.

At that time, this story was shaping up to be very different from the one you're about to read. I would shadow Hill, a Democrat, throughout the valley she calls home, giving an inside look at the challenges young women face when they enter the political sphere. I would observe the bright, shiny parts, such as Hill meeting special-education students at a local elementary school, giving a commencement address at a college and attending a charity fund-raiser for children with cancer. I would hear tip-of-the-iceberg hints of her struggles, such as fighting to speak without being interrupted at a Chamber of Commerce meeting and being told to smile more by constituents. I wasn't expecting anything to twist the arc I had already outlined of a millennial woman ascending to the halls of power.

Then, on October 17, I received a call from a staffer who sounded harried, asking that I refrain from mentioning in the piece Hill's ongoing divorce from Kenny Heslep, her partner of nearly 10 years. It was implied he had become increasingly volatile. I felt apprehensive after the call; I sensed something was coming but wasn't sure what it might be.

The next day, the conservative site Red- State published a blog post detailing a consensual polyamorous affair the congresswoman and Heslep had had with a campaign staffer. The post also included a nude photo of Hill. It was soon followed by a piece in the British tabloid Daily Mail, where more photos were released. They spread across social media like wildfire —just as multiple literal fires were raging across southern California.

"We found out they had 700 more files," Hill would later tell me over the phone. "I just didn't know how long this was going to go on, or what else they were going to have, or how I was going to be able to do the work that mattered to people in my district."

Suddenly, a story that was supposed to be straightforward was radioactive. No one knew how to address this uniquely millennial "sex scandal," and few wanted to touch it. A local assemblyperson who had agreed to be interviewed backed out. A member of Congress whom I'd already spoken to scrambled to retract their statements. On-the-record sources quickly became background or off the record completely. By the time I filed, Hill had given her farewell address from the floor of the House of Representatives, and Heslep, according to his father, had denied

leaking the images, claiming he'd been hacked. I watched in real time as

Hill's freshman promise was taken down in a dazzling conflagration that could only exist at the intersection of sex, power and technology. Hill was part of a great new hope, a wave of young progressives who had been ushered into the 116th Congress in the aftermath of Hillary Clinton's presidential loss in 2016. Her underdog campaign was proof of the resilience and resourcefulness of millennials — proof that when we fight, we can sometimes win.

For Hill's generation in particular, her ousting sparks a special kind of dread; it feels either very familiar or very possible. Millennials are the internet generation, after all. As Republican congressman Matt Gaetz suggested in a tweet amid the scandal, who among us would look good if a vengeful ex-lover shared every intimate photo or text? In this brave new digital world, lapses in judgment and moments of abandon are forever catalogued, waiting to be deployed should someone ever come into power or just happen to be a woman.

"I hate that they won. I hate that I did end up quitting, but the GOP made it clear that they were going to continue this until I quit," Hill says.

By the time this profile hits newsstands, I imagine people will likely have come to their own conclusions. So this isn't just a story about Katie Hill the victim of alleged revenge porn, or Katie Hill the hashtagged



cautionary tale. This is about Katie Hill the congresswoman — the Katie Hill her 700,000 constituents lost when she was driven out by cyber exploitation. And this is about Katie Hill the survivor.

...

The first time I formally met Hill was in her Santa Clarita office. The space was sparsely decorated save for a few framed photographs, one of which was of the nearby Vasquez Rocks. Hill occupied offices across the 25th Congressional District, about a half hour north of Los Angeles and comprising the cities of Santa Clarita, Palmdale, Lancaster and Simi Valley.

Hill has a direct manner of speaking that some might describe as brusque. She often wears a severe, unflappable expression that has been referred to as “resting bitch face,” otherwise known as “a face” on men. She walks at a fleet-footed pace, opting to take the stairs whenever she can; as a public official, she never had time to exercise. In a different world these characteristics would be genderless, but during her time as a candidate and then a congresswoman, they took on a weight she often found exasperating.

“You instantly have criticism about every single bit of your attire, your face, your makeup, your hair,” she said, gesturing toward the tightly secured bun sitting atop her head.

When the now 32-year-old Hill unseated Republican incumbent Steve Knight in November 2018 in a hotly contested race, the win made national headlines. Someone who never thought she would be a politician was thrust into a spotlight that felt all the more blinding because she was a woman and even more so because she was openly bisexual and the first LGBTQ congresswoman from California. This was no small feat in a district where Proposition 8, the same-sex-marriage ban, had passed overwhelmingly just a decade earlier.

Hill recalled other LGBTQ representatives advising her to pass as straight. “They said, ‘You’re married to a man. Why would you come out as bi?’”

In the year following her election, the former nonprofit director spent her days shuttling back and forth across her district and the country. Spending more than half her time in Washington, D.C., Hill turned into a nomad in her hometown — the place where she learned to ride a horse, experienced

young love and suffered through the requisite ill-advised bob cut of late girlhood. The confusion that accompanies such a lifestyle shift became evident when she mistakenly referred to Washington as her home before catching herself. “I’m literally on a plane, on an average week, for 12 hours,” she told me.

A closer look at the district she represents reveals communities that are so disparate, it’s astounding she engaged enough voters to pull off a win. There’s upper-middle-class Santa Clarita with its beloved Six Flags Magic Mountain theme park; the high-desert cities of Palmdale and Lancaster with their growing Latino populations; and traditionally conservative Simi Valley, a bedroom community for Los Angeles County police. Hill mentions the 1992 trial there of the LAPD officers charged with use of excessive force during their arrest of Rodney King — and the L.A. riots following their acquittal.

The demographics of the district are difficult to thumbnail, but so is Hill. She’s a gun owner, an outspoken member of the LGBTQ community, a goat farmer, a sexual-assault survivor, a proud community college graduate and the daughter of a cop who cast his first vote for a Democrat when she ran.

As I trailed Hill through an average day in the district, attending speaking engagements and meetings at places that ranged from a virtually all-white country club to the diverse California Institute of the Arts campus to a majority minority trade school, I witnessed her seamlessly navigate the different enclaves. For the college visit she sported a T-shirt and jeans. Upon arriving at Valencia Country Club for a Chamber of Commerce town hall and spotting a DRESS CODE ENFORCED stencil on a window, she grabbed a suit from a staffer’s car kept on hand for just such an occasion.

Besides the code-switching required of any politician who represents a district as mixed as the 25th, Hill’s biggest challenge was translating to her constituents the work she does on Capitol Hill — namely, her push for affordable housing and health care reform. In an age of fringe politics, she often comes across as a kitchen-table moderate.

“When the two most commonly known names are Donald Trump and AOC, and people tend to associate an entire group with one or the other, I don’t think that’s necessarily healthy,” she said. “A lot of what’s happening in the middle, which is the majority of the country, is not amplified.”

I asked Hill if the ascent of Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as the most recognizable face of the Democratic Party had led to misperceptions. She replied that some people have the responsibility to “push us as far as we can go,” but it’s not usually a reflection of where the party currently leans.

“Her policies are the extreme of our party,” she added of Ocasio-Cortez. “People have associated that the Democrats want to have the Green New

Deal, right? But they don’t know that we also have all these other, more immediately achievable solutions to addressing climate change.”

Hill’s pragmatic progressivism was what made her stand out in a divided Congress and what our political landscape will sorely miss with her resignation. Following her win in 2018, she quickly built a reputation as a bridge, with D.C. outlets touting her unusual ability to cross the aisle. She represented something Capitol Hill has lacked since Republicans won back the House during Barack Obama’s first term.

...

On the afternoon of our first interview in October, Hill asked if she could hitch a ride with me back home. I assumed she meant the three-acre Agua Dulce ranch she once shared with her former partner. Instead she directed us to a quiet residential street in Santa Clarita lined with craftsman houses. As we pulled into the driveway, a German shepherd named Thaddeus bounded up to greet Hill, followed by her mother.

In the midst of her divorce from Heslep, the politician whose campaign Vice News termed “the most millennial ever” was doing a very millennial thing: moving back in with her parents.

Unlike most citizens, Hill didn’t have the luxury of riding out the tough moments of divorce in private. As soon as she was elected one of the 435 representatives in the House, her life became openly dissected and derided for all who disagreed with her political affiliations.

“It’s a weird thing, that you have to navigate being public, because it is public, right? He filed, and it was immediately picked up in the media,” she told me at the time.

Hill is unsure if she’ll ever consider marriage again. In light of everything that has unfolded, it would be short-sighted to assume her career didn’t factor into the end of her relationship.

“If I want to be good in this role, I will not be in a position of ever putting someone else’s needs first,” she said. “In the pyramid of things, it’s going to be my constituents, then myself, to be able to live. And then your partner comes after that.”

I didn’t ask about Heslep again.

...

Three days after her resignation, I call Hill as she prepares to leave Washington, vowing to take her battle “outside the halls of Congress” in a heartfelt video posted on Twitter. The crisis is still fresh, the hurt still raw, and she hasn’t had time to reflect. She hasn’t spoken to other reporters yet, and she preemptively apologizes if she sounds “mildly incoherent.”

Hill tells me a few freshmen members of Congress are planning something for her that

This is a true threat. This is its own form of assault.”



evening. Her voice cracks as she struggles to find the words to describe it, perhaps wanting to avoid “good-bye party” or anything that feels final. Sighing, she settles on “little get-together.”

She has been actively steering clear of Capitol Hill, lying low for security reasons, to dodge reporters and because “emotionally, it’s been pretty tough.”

She worries about other young women and girls who may decide not to run for public office after witnessing what she went through. Regardless of the relationship with her campaign staffer, her fate was decided by the photographs — not because of a consensual polyamorous relationship. If not for the proliferation of these images, it’s likely Hill would still be in office.

“That’s the thing I’m most concerned about,” she says. “There’s a whole generation of us who have pictures that could be compromising. It’s normal, right? It’s not even, ‘Oh, it’s so salacious.’ Everybody does it.”

In Hill’s case, the photos were published without her consent or knowledge, but the average millennial would barely bat an eyelash at the willing exchange of such images — emphasis on willing. A 2017 study from the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative found that roughly one in eight participants had been either victims of or threatened with “nonconsensual pornography.” Our nation’s laws are fighting to keep up: Forty-six states, Washington, D.C. and the U.S. territory of Guam have passed legislation that criminalizes the publication of revenge porn.

Hill, who worked in the nonprofit sector before running for Congress, plans to partner with an advocacy organization to raise awareness of the havoc revenge porn can wreak. “The emotional trauma that it causes people is pretty much untold. This is a true threat. This is its own form of assault,” she says.

Hill wasn’t the only one who faced harassment with the release of the photos; staffers in her congressional and district offices had to field an onslaught of offensive phone calls.

“They’ll talk to the staff and be like, ‘Will you tell Katie Hill I want in on one of the threesomes she’s having, but also

she should get a boob job?’ ”

Ultimately, it wasn’t sensational headlines or harassment on social media that prompted her decision to resign. It was her mother’s advice.

“She said to me, ‘You’ve done a ton, and you’re going to be able to do more, but at the end of the day, you don’t have to put yourself through this. You’re young.’ She always sees me as her daughter first, and she saw how awful it was.”

Hill says her mom frequently sends her inspirational memes, the saccharine kind many of our boomer-age mothers exchange on the social media graveyard of Facebook. After our call, she forwards me one her mother shared with her when she was considering resignation.

“When something goes wrong in your life, just yell ‘plot twist’ and move on,” shouts the digital pep talk in a funky font.

Hill, who admits that she could be more appreciative of her parents, seems comforted by these words.

“This is a big plot twist, so let’s see what the character makes of it,” she says. “That’s my job.”

Before we end the call, I ask whether, despite everything that has happened to her, she might consider running for political office again. I brace for a measured no — an echo of what we’ve heard from other female politicians cheated out of an

elected position, such as Stacey Abrams and even Hillary Clinton. She replies, “Obviously, I’m going to need some time away, but it’s almost something I want to do on principle.”

She suggests there might be some freedom in having her private life tossed out into the world. With no skeletons left to uncover, she could become unassailable.

“Every single bit of my dirty laundry will be out there — the most private things I didn’t ever think would come out. I’ll be quite literally fully exposed to the voters,” she says with a laugh. “So judge me for what I’ve got.”

She finishes the thought: “This was a chapter that was important and that meant something. I think I have a legacy that is going to matter. This is just the beginning.” And with that, her very millennial political scandal ends with an ageless political message: hope. ■



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